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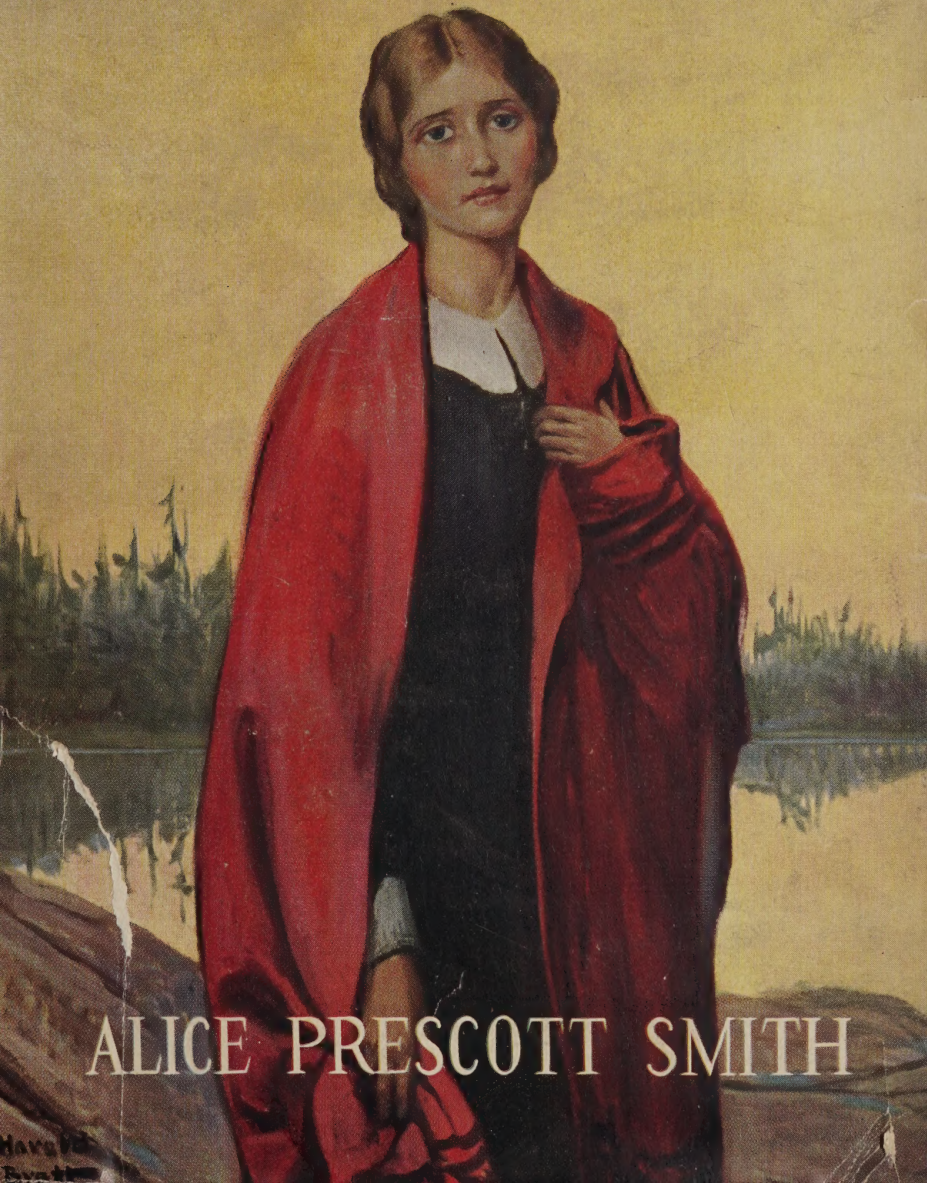

ALICE PRESCOTT SMITH

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By Alice Prescott Smith

Author of "Montlivet"

In the days when France held Canada against the English, a mysterious stranger who gave his name as "Le Claire," appeared at a distant outpost. He talked like a Frenchman, said he was a fur-trader, and lived in the settlement, although he made frequent trips into the Indian camp across the river.

In truth, he was a well-born English patriot and adventurer named Sargent, and when Langlade, the director, questioned his faulty credentials, he was saved only by the quick wit of the beautiful widow of a French officer.

How Sargent found that this woman was his sister-in-law, how for her sake he saved the encampment from a massacre by the Indians, and how he, in turn, fell deeply in love, makes an extraordinarily moving historical romance comparable with Sabatini for absorbing interest, and with "Marie Chapdelaine" for a vivid sense of wilderness life and wilderness people.

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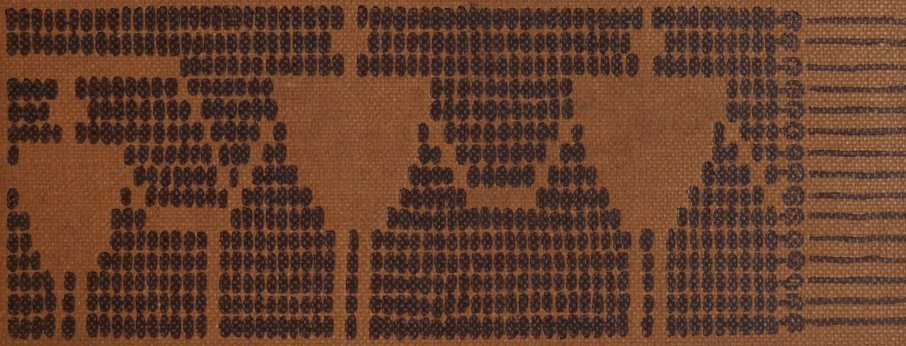

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BY

ALICE PRESCOTT SMITH

AUTHOR OF "MONTLIVET"

BOSTON AND NEW YORK

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

The Riverside Press Cambridge

1925

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CHAPTER I

I LIE TO MY SOLICITOR

A MAN'S calling should shape his body. Solicitors, for example, should be short, well-paunched, and spectacled. Nor should they be beyond middle age, since ripeness of years is out of place in a position that should carry confidence, but not too great authority. I thought this out while listening to my own solicitor. He was miscast, I decided. The man was old, of great stature, and had the head of a Dante, so that it was hard to remember one need not obey him. As it was, he was rating me; worse, I was submitting to it — though I had, but that morning, found gray in my hair.

'How can you think of leaving England at this hour?' he demanded.

Now a man should not look like Philosophy embodied, and yet declaim stupidities. The form of his speech irritated me, yet I knew I was but sick with myself. I was hatching a great project, but could think nothing but trivialities.

'This hour! What is sacred about this hour?' I snapped. 'February, 1758! A Dutchman on the throne, and men's minds in pickle! Show me an hour

since time began when England was as little worth living in as now.'

He looked troubled; he disliked rudeness and heresy. 'But what will you do in America?' he evaded.

I shifted. 'There is money in the fur trade.'

He shook his head. He sat across the table from me, and his manner, and the prelude of his manufactured coughing, insisted that I hear him out. He began as if the attack were new. 'Mr. Sargent, I entreat you, listen soberly. Remember I have known you since — well, since you had to climb to that same chair and I gave you candy that I might talk to your father undisturbed.'

I laughed. 'Come, Mr. Claxton, you've no sweetmeats for me now. It's medicine you have. What is it?'

He would not unbend. 'I have known you since childhood,' he reiterated. 'Why should you desire to make more money?'

I hated this talk. The man cared for me, and I was playing a vile part with him. I walked to the window. The Strand was full of drabbled women; the London sunlight was muddy as dregged ale; the wind sat east. Why, indeed, desire anything in so gray and mad a world! I turned back.

'But one must desire something,' I argued.

He would not look away. 'I have built hopes on you,' he said. 'All your life you have had a purpose, and worked hard. You wished a fortune. You made it. Now, I look to you — Mr. Sargent, I appeal to you — do something with your life. You have sufficient money.'

'The money was almost an accident,' I returned. 'I pursued it, yes, but the chase was the thing. That's over. Now what? Can you supply a new goal?'

'Our country is at war.'

I shook my head. 'Why be shot to humble the vanity of Pompadour! What's the Prussian Frederick to me! No, I'll wear no red coat.'

'But our Government?'

'The divine right of his most potent majesty, George the Second! You can hardly mean that.' My head wagged again. 'Can you see me at Hampton Court?'

'Then why not busy yourself with your estates, your country interests?'

I came back and stretched an arm across the table. 'Look!' I admonished. 'As little meat as the saint's bones in the sacristy! I was thinking, but a moment gone, that the least a man could do was to look his rôle. What figure have I for a well-fed squire, content with his hounds and his borough! No, good friend, try once more if you would keep me from America and the beaver skins.'

He made his last throw with some diffidence. 'Your boy — is it right to leave him? He has no mother.'

I knew he was moved to venture this. 'I'm of little use to the boy just now,' I said soberly. 'He's in good hands, and, as you know, any question about him will be referred to you.'

'Then you mean literally that you are going to America for trade in beavers?'

'Why not?'

But he would not argue further. His old eyes sifted me, found me wanting, and there was silence between us. It was a harder moment than I had expected. Well, it would pass. I had tracked the world somewhat, and found that most things lie in circles.

'You'll keep an eye on the boy?' I went on.

He bowed. 'How old is the lad?'

'Twelve years.'

'And you think he does not need you!'

I smiled. 'Come, Mr. Claxton, I'm no monster. The boy's mine. He's my heir, my — well, what else have I? But we're both rather pulling at the chain. I've tried to shape the boy, and have only twisted him. He's with his mother's people now, and happy. Yes, he's better without me for a time.'

His disapproval did not soften. 'Is the boy — Stuart, you call him? — is he wild?'

'Wild?' I could have laughed from a heart uncomfortably leaden. 'No, he's far from wild. He's good and literal. He'll be a pillar of the Empire. But you'll see him. What else is to be gone over?'

Mr. Claxton coughed. 'That — that matter of the ring?'

'Of course.' I clapped my head for my thick-wittedness. 'You've news of it?'

'I have found it.'

I jumped to my feet. The thought of that ring could sting like a gadfly. 'Who has it?'

But Mr. Claxton would not hasten. 'I said I had heard of it — not that I could get it. I cannot. I have tried.'

'But where is it? My wife had it.'

'Your wife gave it away to — to a kinswoman. She — the kinswoman will not part with it.'

'To what kinswoman?'

'A Madame de Godefroy.'

I took a turn across the room. 'You must be mistaken,' I said with my throat dry. 'My wife had no kinswoman named Godefroy.'

Mr. Claxton bowed.

'Who is she?' I stormed. 'Who does she pretend to be?'

He drew papers from his pocket. 'You know her. But you knew her as Hortense Le Claire. She married some six months back.'

And then indeed I walked the room to get myself in hand. The ring in itself was little; my wife's disposal of it, much. I thought of my wife with gentleness, yet death had not destroyed her power to wound. But Mr. Claxton was watching.

'I know Hortense Le Claire only by name,' I said, coolly enough. 'She's a half-sister of my wife, you remember; her father was French. She has always lived in Paris. She cannot want the ring.'

'But she does.'

'You've written her?'

He tapped his papers. 'Many times. She is a woman of decision.'

I thought a moment. A ring is a ring, but this one had been in my family since Magna Charta. I wanted it for myself, and for my boy.

'We must see this Madame,' I decided. 'I'm off to America as soon as possible. But we'll see this kinswoman, as you call her, first.'

'That, too, has been tried.'

I looked up. 'You've been to Paris?'

'Twice.'

I was suddenly short of words. Here was a friend, and I was leaving him with lies in my mouth. It was no light thing he had done — going to Paris for me. He was old, and the Channel passage must have tried him. Also, I had occasion to know how he dreaded any break in routine. 'You should not have gone!' I protested.

But he answered dryly. 'Why not? You have been much occupied of late.' A faint red showed on the ridge under his eyes. 'This small matter was mine to arrange. I regret, sir, that I failed.'

'Failed! Indeed not!' I took the papers from him, and the parchment skin of his hands smote me. Yes, he was old. I glanced through the papers. Unquestionably my wife's sister had decision of phrase. 'Failed!' I cried. 'On the contrary. These letters pique me. I leave for Paris to-morrow.'

'She is not there.'

'Not there?'

'She married,' he reminded me. 'She married Nicholas de Godefroy of the regiment of Auxerrois. He has been sent to Canada.'

'She went with him?'

'She followed him some months ago.'

'She went to Canada — to Canada,' I murmured. My tongue was vacant, but my mind was off on a new leash, chasing forbidden business. I had to shake myself back. 'She's a plucky dame. Well, well, I may see her.'

I could see him withdraw. 'You are going to Canada?'

But I laughed at him. 'I am going to Boston,' I said. 'To the good town of Boston, owned, I understand, equally by the devil of greed and the reformed religion. Also to New Amsterdam famed for good grog, and better, beaver skins. But who knows where I may end? Unless Brigadier Wolfe works miracles, the French may put us all in chains, and take us to Canada as state captives. So I may see Madame de Godefroy in Montreal.'

The old face across from me whitened. 'Forgive me if I say your father was a patriot. It is strange to me that you can jest of your country's extremities in this light way.'

I could only shake my head. 'If I cannot fight, I can at least make money,' I mumbled without looking at him. 'So if the Hanoverian George gets in too hard straits I may lend him a groschen or two. There, if you like, is a patriotic excuse for my search for beaver skins.'

He would not argue further. He lighted the tapers, for the dusk had crept in, and we went over a few last papers.

'We are parting for a long time,' he said as we went down to the street together.

Yes, we were parting for a long time. I had a besetting impulse to tell him the truth; that he was saying good-bye to so hare-brained a fool that there was little probability that we should meet again. But I resisted. I took my leave with light phrases, and with a mind that shirked the issue. Try as I

might, I could not feel the occasion weighty. I was leaving. If I did not return, what matter? I left behind a boy who was of my blood, but not of my temper, a fortune in which I felt small interest, and a friend or two who liked me for my tongue and my tobacco. It was little to show for a man's work. No wonder I could shrug it away. Yes, it was fitting that I should talk of ancestral rings, and of the price of beaver, as if that bounded my desire. It more than bounded my accomplishment. I had worked hard, but had no anchor for my pains. A man is driftwood and a failure who, at thirty-five, can leave his home without emotion. I had little use for myself.

'Good-bye,' I said for the fifth time. 'I shall bring you a suit of castors, and an Iroquois. You may sell the first in order to buy the patriotism of the second. They say a redskin does nothing except for barter.'

Mr. Claxton looked down. 'I may not see you again,' he said stiffly. 'I am old. You will find your affairs in order. If you do not return at the end of a year and I am alive, I shall follow.'

He turned to go, but I grasped at his arm. 'No, no! Don't follow. No matter what happens, don't try to follow.'

But he drew away from my hand, and started down the street. 'In a year,' his voice trailed back, 'in a year, I shall follow.'

I looked after him, and blessed the flare of exasperation that kept my eyes from growing dim. Yet I knew his threat an empty one; for the path I was about to take was uncharted. I would leave no tracks.

CHAPTER II

I TELL THE TRUTH TO A PERSONAGE

Saying good-bye to Mr. Claxton did not cut all my cables; there remained a personage to interview. I met the personage that evening in Fleet Street in a small house which I owned, and which chanced to be vacant. We came to the rendezvous separately, after the skies were black. Mystery has place in the forest, but in town, in the midst of clatter and folk, and everyday concerns, it has always a touch of play-acting and triviality. Yet we thought secrecy necessary. It was possible I was watched, and it was certain my visitor must account for every movement. For my visitor was Mr. Pitt.

That he, the War Minister, should have agreed to this interview, set my blood hammering. I had not dared go to him for fear of observation; now I thanked him warmly for coming to me. I welcomed him in a dark hall which smelled of dust and stagnant air, and led him to a small room where I had a table and chairs in waiting. He seated himself by the table, and I sat across from him, lighted candles between.

'The maps,' he demanded. It may have fretted him that I sat in his presence; few underlings took that liberty.

I drew out my papers, and smoothed them between the candles. 'They will show you little you do not know,' I premised. 'It is said, Mr. Pitt, that you,

who have never been in America, could find your way on that frontier without a guide.'

He had his fingers on the map. 'I have talked with trappers and frontiersmen,' he said absently. 'But go over the routes with me again. Go over it as if I knew nothing. War in every crack and cranny of the world; Europe, Africa, India, America! I cannot carry all the detail. Come, map your routes, and your plans.'

It was new to see this man admit weariness and confusion. He thought lightly of me and my project, or he would have spurred himself to give fire to me. I laid my hand on the drawing. 'It's not needed,' I said, 'save to show you one small, black dot. I've no machine-drawn plans. I have nothing to do with your armies, and know little of them. Louisburg, Ticonderoga — they are no more than names to me. I am intent on a one-man battle. I am going in search of Charles de Langlade.'

'I know, I know.' He sat back in the stiff chair, and dropping study of the map, focused on me. 'You told me this. But I see little in it. This Langlade, I understand, is a French half-breed who commands a rabble of western Indians. What more do you know of him?'

I moved nearer that the candle-light might search me, and I sought the man's eyes. 'This Langlade,' I began slowly, 'is the son of a well-born Frenchman and an Ottawa woman — daughter of a chief. He is a partisan officer, and controls from five hundred to a thousand Indians, as many men as there are warriors in the western tribes. That is his rabble, as

you call it. Ottawas, Winnebagoes, Sacs, Pottawatamies — he holds them all, as you hold us here in England, Mr. Pitt, not perhaps in the hollow of his hand, but under his turned-down thumb. He holds the balance of power. Where Langlade and his rabble appear, victory follows. Take Braddock's defeat — Langlade was responsible. He may have a rabble, but the result set Europe ablaze.' I stopped with a jerk. I was not kindling the man with my rhetoric. 'I don't know why I say all this,' I went on, 'for I can work without your help — or even your approbation. I mean this in all courtesy. I wish nothing from you but a hearing. There is but one contingency where I would ask more.'

'And that contingency?'

'A remote one in your mind. The chance of my succeeding.'

He half rose. 'State your plans exactly. Suppose you reach this half-breed — what gain?'

'Mr. Pitt, why listen to me at all?'

He wagged his head. 'I have heard things of you. Your credentials are as good as your plan is bad.'

'You have heard things? I can make a fair guess at what. You have heard that I was shrewd, hard, successful. That I was no man of fashion, and had no itch for government preferment.'

'Yes, I have heard these things.'

'Then let them stand as a background of sanity to my insane idea. When we talked before, I told you I wished to reach the extreme western forts of Canada. That I should go as an unauthorized spy.'

'To accomplish what?'

I pointed to the map. 'The Indians control the West. The French forts that hold the western waterway are not garrisoned. They are protected by the local Indians. Why are those Indians French in sympathy instead of English?'

'The Iroquois are for us?'

'The Iroquois are not against us. That is about as much as we can claim. Where have we a commander who could lead the Iroquois on a two months' march as Langlade leads his tribes! No, we don't understand the Indians.'

'And your plan?'

'It is the western tribes we need and fear. Langlade controls them. We know little of their number, their power, or their loyalty. No Englishman has been allowed to get to them.'

'And you?'

'I shall try. If I can get near Langlade, I shall at least learn some lessons as to handling savages.'

He pondered, nodding. 'Would a commission help you?'

I could not withhold an impatient flick of my thumb. My explanation had been dull indeed, that he should ask such a question. 'You have gold-barred gentlemen enough,' I said testily. 'No, Mr. Pitt, I am simply an unauthorized madman to whom you are indulgent. If I wore a red coat, I should be dead before a month. The frontier is a dead-line at this moment.'

'What coat will you wear?'

'What I can. I shall start as an English trapper, then shift into French garb with the occasion.'

'You can pass for a Frenchman?'

I could only smile. 'That is to be seen. I passed my youth in a French colony, so speak the language — somewhat idiomatically. As to my accent — it's probably British. We shall see.'

'Humph! You have funds?'

'Ample.'

'Then what can I give you?'

I hesitated. 'A listening ear. A man grows weary of being always alone with his folly — even when the folly is dear to him. I wanted you to know. I may not return — and I — well, my plan may be good for something, even if I fail. And you, too, love England.'

He gave me his hand, and we looked at each other. 'I fear you are not likely to return,' he said after a moment. 'However, you are strong, lean-muscled, yet broad-shouldered — that is a conquering type. You will have much to endure.'

'I will have much to adventure. You see this small black dot? It is Fort Saint Francis. If I can reach it, I may hope to find de Langlade.'

He bent above the drawing. 'A pitifully blank sheet,' he groaned. 'No English settlements west of the Miami. So this is your fort. How will you reach it?'

'A Frenchman would go up the Saint Lawrence, then down through the Great Lakes. That way is barred to me. I must follow the Ohio River to the Illinois country, then go north to the Fox River. Fort Saint Francis is at the mouth of the Fox.'

'Why is Langlade there? I thought he was second officer at Mackinac.'

'He is. But he is also superintendent of the Indians for the division of La Baye. Then, too, he is a fur-trader. I may find employment with him. It's all a gamble.'

He nodded at that. 'A losing gamble, I'm afraid. I can't quite see what you're to gain in proportion to your risks. You're taking large hazards.'

'Very large,' I agreed. 'But a gamester is at his best with the odds against him. And I suppose I am a gamester — it's the vice of our age. If I do not throw the dice at Ranelagh Gardens, it's because I wish larger stakes. What I gain, lies mainly in the fall of the cards — probably nothing. But I can lose nothing.'

'Your head!'

'I hope not. And you'll agree it's a gain if I can sow revolt among Langlade's followers. Every warrior I draw from him will save us a scalp or more.'

'You spoke of the chance of your needing me.'

I groped for words. 'The chance is slight. My successes, as you see, will be the invisible sort. Yet — who can tell? Should I succeed, should I, for instance, be able to deflect a tribe to our standard, I should like assurance that I'll not be interfered with. That I'll not have to account to officialdom.'

He laughed rather sadly. 'You're looking far ahead. Yes, I promise you free rein, provided, always, that I'm still in a position to promise anything. No one else knows your plans?'

'No one is my confidant. I've had to get a great deal of information — that may have caused comment. But among my associates here in London,

such schemes would not be believed of me. I'm known — well, you know how I'm known.'

He smiled. 'An odd mixture!' he said under his breath, and passed to other matters. We talked somewhat gravely. Mr. Pitt was said to be eloquent to every one on the poorest occasion. I saw none of it that night. We talked as friends, and one does not show rhetoric at the hearthstone. Also I think that he looked at me as already a dead man, and the thought saddened him. But we had much to say and it was late when we blew out the candles, and groped together to the door.

'You leave no address?' he asked, as we paused outside.

'A Boston one with my solicitor. I expect no news.'

He studied me in the starlight. 'Then there's no woman in your life. I should have known that by your readiness to jump over the moon in this fashion.'

'No, there's no woman.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' he said lingeringly. 'A man works in freer air without a woman. And this is too much a petticoat war, as it is. Maria Theresa, Pompadour, Elizabeth of Russia — their skirts are round my feet at every turn. Well, don't vaunt your independence. You may be bound hand and foot on the other side.'

This was poor jesting. 'If I have kept free in London,' I said, 'you would not commend me to a squaw! Though they are said to be docile, and might make good propagandists. If I bring back a Pocahontas, Mr. Pitt, I promise she shall wear the colors of your ministry.'

And so we parted.

CHAPTER III

I TRY MY MASK

THREE months later I lay on my stomach on the ground, using a forest pool as mirror. I was an odd Narcissus, but a complacent one. My face pleased me. It was bronzed and weather-worn, and might have belonged equally to Frenchman or Abyssinian. Many weeks of forest life had given me the vagabond's mask; the ruddy, clear-veined, English look was gone.

I had reason for this attack of selfconsciousness. My Indians reported that a white man and two Indians were in camp around the bend of the stream. We had not seen a white man in weeks, and were now well in the territory of the Illinois. So the man around the bend must be French. This was the moment I had been waiting. Up to this point my fantastic journey had gone smoothly; three months had marched in arranged programme — the voyage, the stay in Boston, the weeks of forest journeying; all had unrolled like papyrus manuscript, benign Fate holding the scroll. But all this had been prelude, preparation. Now the lights were ready, the curtains drawn, and I must strut on the stage in my new rôle. I peered again into the pool. Yes, I looked the woodsman. If my wits were as well suited as my clothes, I might venture on civilities with my woodland neighbor.

Yet I did not go at once. I lingered. I looked at my four Indians lolling in the sun, and at my bales of merchandise piled high against a tree. We had kindled a fire in this spot, so it was home. It was all peaceful, wooing. In fifteen minutes, if my tongue betrayed me, I might be shot. I tried to drive my mind from thoughts of danger, but I could not but remember wire hoops I had seen on bushes — small hoops with scalps stretched on them to dry. I pulled myself together.

'Cochon,' I called, 'I'm going to the camp around the bend.' Cochon, a giant Miami, rolled to his feet, and came to me. He was a camp-following Indian of a low type, and spoke enough French to act as interpreter. He liked his nickname. He knew nothing of pigs, but the rounded syllables pleased him as might a feather in his hair. He picked up his gun.

'I will go with Monsieur.'

Now I had thought to take Cochon, but his readiness made me hesitate. I did not know these Indians, having come upon them only the week before. I had made many shifts of escort. Leaving Boston as an Englishman, I had, by various devices, changed something of my identity with each relay of guides, until I had gradually slipped into my French guise. I had worked slowly, with infinite pains, and felt I had contrived the changes of skin with some skill. So I was convinced it would be difficult to connect John Sargent of London with Auguste Le Claire, petty trader among the western tribes.

I had taken the name of Le Claire in some idleness, since I knew it well, and it came easily to my tongue.

My wife's mother had married a Le Claire as her second husband and had gone with him to France. My wife was a child of the first marriage, and was left in school in England. I had never known the Le Claire family, but they had often irritated me. They could lend me their name in payment.

I kept Cochon standing while I pondered what to do. If I were denounced as English by this Frenchman whom I was going out to meet, Cochon would probably kill me. He would fear I might dig out his eyes to make devil soup; rumor having warned him of that English habit. No, if I were to be unmasked, the smaller the audience the better. I sent Cochon away, and looked to the priming of my gun.

I crept around the bend, knowing the Frenchman had probably discovered me long ere this, and had me well under observation. I was unsure of my woodcraft, and saw eyes in the trees. I schooled my face for the encounter.

But I acted my mummery to the leaves and the air. When I parted the bushes I came upon a group as quiet and unsuspecting as if it were a summer day upon the Thames. I drew back. The white man was lying on the ground, asleep apparently. His back was toward me, and all I could see was the curve of his long body, and his outflung arm. Some feet down the river two Indians patched a battered canoe.

I hardly know why I did not go forward at once, but the picture held me. The afternoon was heavy with spring, and the rough camp into which I was looking was dropped into a bed of young ferns and springing grasses. The Indians worked quietly,

their low gutturals hardly a murmur, and the air was so sweetly still it seemed I could hear the breathing of the sleeping man.

The man lay easily, and I watched him with a certain envy. He was meanly dressed, in tattered, grease-soaked rags, but his body was lithe and young. I felt stiffly awkward as I looked at the line of his shoulder, his waist, his thigh. No sleeping leopard would have been fairer of proportion. Pliant France, stolid England! He turned a little, and I grudged him the smooth fluency of even his sleeping movements. Yet I must imitate. I must try for that Gallic suppleness of mind and body.

I suppose my fixed attention waked him. He suddenly sat up, faced about, and with no preliminary start or ejaculation, gazed at me silently.

And I, on my side, could make no sound. I had looked on many marred faces, but never on one so terrible. Half the man's face was gone. I was not new to hideous sights, but this one found me unprepared. I had been thinking of grace and beauty, and now this met me in the gentle softness of the forest spring. I stood dumb, my hands cold, and no words in my throat.

So the man spoke first. 'Then I am as terrible as that.' He spoke in French. The marvel was that he could articulate, but he did it fairly well. I went to him, and out of my confusion said a child's speech — a woman's. 'I am sorry,' I mumbled stupidly.

He turned the unmarred side of his face toward me, and I saw he heard but badly. But he caught the sense of my speech, and forgave the pity in my face.

He pointed to a seat on a pile of skins. 'I have not seen a white face since —' He flicked his hand. 'Well, what news? Where are you from?'

Where, indeed, was I from? I knew Quebec and Montreal only by hearsay. I must not venture on talk of them until forced to it. I seated myself, and offered him tobacco. 'My news is many months stale. I am on my way to La Baye. My Indians are round the bend. Can you tell me where we are, as regards the Fox River?'

The man shifted. 'To La Baye!' The eye that was not destroyed looked at me sharply. 'To Fort Saint Francis?'

'Yes. Fort Saint Francis, or La Baye. They are the same, I believe. You've been there.'

He had accepted my tobacco. Now he stopped to draw out a pipe that he wore on a leather thong around his neck. That was a voyageur's habit, not a gentleman's and pondering that made me notice his clothing was too ragged to admit a pocket. 'No, they are not the same,' he said slowly, 'I have never been there, but I understand that La Baye is a settlement — a few traders' huts — and that the fort is a mile down the river. You have business at La Baye?'

Now this was too direct questioning for the wilderness, where all men bear a secret if of nothing more important than where the best peltries can be found. But the man before me was as exempt from the usages of life as if he were a leper. I felt constrained to answer.

'I wish to learn something of the fur trade, learn

by experience. I hear much of Sieur de Langlade. I may find employment with him.'

I saw the man examine me under the curve of his arm. After the first he had tried to spare me the horror of his face, and had screened himself. I took his scrutiny stolidly. I was sure he could see but indistinctly, and with his blurred eyes and ears there was little risk that he would cavil at my looks or accent.

'You are older than most of the employees,' he observed.

I knew this to be a weak point; one that opened me to suspicion. So I settled to my pipe, and let him see me smile. 'You think me somewhat old to be beginning my fortunes,' I rejoined after a comfortable interval.

His long, well-shaped hand made courteous disclaimer. 'But this is the land of the very young,' he explained, 'of undisciplined boys, and ambitious children. When a man nears thirty, he is concerned with his roof-tree, and his dinner. You are new to the woods?'

I nodded. 'I'm afraid that's evident. But I'm not a beginner in all lines. I've had, as you see, some years of roof-trees, and better dinners, and am minded to try the reverse. I have some money, and would like to increase it. But why buy a trader's license when I don't know what I'm getting? That has never been my way of business. No, I would come, and look over the ground. If I try my fortune as a clerk — well, I'll not stay in any such position long. I wish to see the whole process; the trapping,

the dickering with the Indians. Yes, I would begin at the bottom.'

I had spoken with the prosy boastfulness I had often found the property of the painstaking, honest man. There must have been candor in my face, though lies in my mouth, for the man believed me. A sense of comradeship stole out to me in the way he relaxed. He chatted over his shoulder, indifferently, civilly.

'It is too late for the trapping, as you know,' he remarked. 'The red deer is the only skin to be taken now, and it is worth little. But the Indians should be coming in with peltries. La Baye is a great *entrepôt;* it should be a good place for you.'

We talked further upon this. He had said he did not know La Baye so I could not question him too closely. But I saw he had been there. And he was too negligent to bolster up his little falsehood. I began to see in him an indifference deeper than anything I had known. His body was living, but his interest was dead. He did not question further as to the world I had left; obviously he did not care. He asked nothing about the war. I had seen despair kill self-interest, but never before had I seen it destroy fear and curiosity. However, I had never until now seen real reason for despair.

And so we talked on. He spoke pleasantly, methodically, as if it were a duty; the only courtesy he could offer. He told of the water-ways, and the trapping. And at last he showed a smoulder of life still in him, for he spoke of himself. He spoke abruptly. I had glanced at the lowering sun, and made a mo-

tion to go. He dropped his arm, and turned full on me.

'I am very terrible, am I?' he demanded.

Yes, he was very terrible. I was not ashamed of the lump in my throat. 'You are less so when you speak,' I said lamely, and tried to smile at him.

But he was answered. He turned away, and the hand he used as screen shook slightly, but he held his head gallantly. 'You are the first of my kind I have seen,' he said quietly. 'You are a good mirror — and a kind one. I am fortunate to meet a gentleman.'

I made another move to go, but he delayed me. 'What are your Indians? Where did you get them?'

I could not mistake his tone; it was friendly. 'I have four Indians — Miamis, I think they call themselves. They came into my camp a week ago. One of them spoke French, so I engaged them.'

'You pay them?'

'Rum and beads.'

'Rum!' he echoed. 'Why rum instead of brandy? We leave rum to the English as a rule.'

'I've been on the English frontier; near enough to use the underground dépôts. The Quakers think more of church than country — also they like a thrifty bargain.'

Apparently my speech did not seem unusual; he shrugged. 'I see. The English have always long pockets. May I see your Indians?'

Now I knew little of woodcraft, but it was my business to know something of men. I obeyed this one without questioning. I went to my camp, collected

my followers, and brought them to stand before him in line. My youngest Indian gave a grunting cry at sight of the man, but Cochon and the other two blinked as usual, and looked furtively about to see what chance there was of begging food or trinkets.

The man looked them over, and I noted that he did it with courtesy. I had much ado to follow his Indian speech, though I had some book knowledge of dialects. But I felt from his tone, and from what words I could catch, that he was treating them with more fraternity than I had done. He bade them sit, and, as they squatted in a semi-circle before him, gave them tobacco. I saw he was taking pains with them, and for my sake. I laid this away in mind, and thanked him. When he dismissed them, he asked me to stay a moment.

'They seem right enough,' he observed as he watched them go. 'I saw you were new to the woods, and feared you might have a band of cut-throats in train. Settlement Indians are poor things, of course, but they're the only ones who will submit to hire — even for rum. It's odd you found them, for you are beyond the range. It is not wise to hire Indians.'

I pointed to his two followers. 'You do not hire yours?'

He shrugged. 'My Indians? They are only slaves — Pawnees. I bought them from the Ottawas, and paid a litre of brandy, and an ell of red cloth. They stay with me only because my yoke is light and they fear their former captors.'

'Pawnees,' I pondered. 'It's a new name.'

He stared. 'You've never heard of the Pawnees.

Well, it's a western tribe — out beyond the Mississippi.' He still stared, and flicked his thumbs; then shrugged as if come to a decision. 'A child in a bear pit!' he muttered. He turned to me fully, forgetting to shield his face. 'You're dangerously new to it all,' he said kindly. 'New to tribes, manners, customs. Walk warily. You seem too trustful — too — too open. Can you see differences in Indian tribes?'

'Very little.'

He shrugged again. 'May your wits guard you! After all, you're but a few days' travel from La Baye. But watch Amaiou.'

'Which one is he?'

He turned his palms outward in despair. 'You don't know his name! I mean the young Indian; the one who cried when he saw me.'

I was piqued. 'The boy? Why should I care what he calls himself! Cochon is their leader, and I deal with him; the rest are chattels.'

He looked me over as if I were overdoing the rôle of blockhead; as if suspicion entered. Yet I had, for rarity, been telling entirely the truth. 'No Indian is a chattel,' he said briefly. 'One does not make house-dogs of leopards. But your Amaiou puzzles me. He wears his hair like a Miami, but his speech is more that of the southern tribes. Then his hair — did you notice it? It is light in texture; almost inclined to curl. I can't make him out. He has shrewd eyes, and opens them fully. I'm not sure Cochon is their leader.'

'You think there is a mystery?'

It was a child's question, and he treated it as such.

'All is mystery.' He gestured at the forest. 'You, I, Cochon, my slaves over there! We all carry a secret, and there's death behind every tree. That is what keeps us from dying; dying of hardship and loneliness. We walk in a labyrinth; no step is free. The risk of it keeps our interest alive, and saves us from madness. But watch your Amaiou.'

I thanked him warmly. 'You are greatly kind, and with no compulsion but your instinctive generosity. You leave me in your debt.'

He shook his head. 'No, the scales are balanced. I owed you something for the way you met me. I dreaded seeing a white man, and thought I might kill him when I did. But you have behaved most decently. If I've requited you, the page is clear.'

I felt suddenly cold. Had the iron so entered his pride that he felt he had better kill than be looked on? I had no care for his offhanded patronage, but I groped for words to change his despair.

'This is but au revoir,' I said. 'Will you give me your name — some name — that I may have a tag by which to think of you?'

He caught my thought, and seemed pleased. 'Monsieur X is as good a name as any,' he said after a moment. 'Many another man, dead to the world, has used it before now. And yours?'

I bowed. 'Auguste Le Claire. A child in the bear pit; a Gascon adventurer with gray in his hair, and folly in his heart; a —'

A motion halted me. I had been prattling unconcernedly, enjoying the sound of my dubious French. And I was standing side toward the man feeling

courtesy required that I keep my eyes away. But a move from him warned me. I looked. He had drawn his knife, and was crouching. His terrible face was livid.

I waited for him to spring, and calculated my chances. I could use a knife shrewdly myself, and had time to think that in five minutes we might both be dead. But he suddenly straightened, banged his knife to its sheath, and turned away. I saw from the swelling cords of his neck that he was pulling himself to harness, and judged that self-discipline was new and hard.

'Pardon!' He turned to me. 'I thought I heard a noise. One must be always on guard in the forest. So your name is Le Claire?'

It was badly done. His voice was as hostile as his bared knife-blade. So it was my name that metamorphosed him! I must offer him another. I must cover the situation in some fashion till I found where I stood.

'Yes, Le Claire.' I kept my voice indifferent, but balanced my musket in my hands. 'Le Claire or Huguet. Huguet, if you are a stickler for family.'

'Huguet?' His face cooled somewhat. He apparently thought I was lying, but, for some reason, preferred to believe. He decided to play the game further. 'Why Huguet?' His voice was once more the gentleman's.

I looked at the ground. 'It's a family story. My father was the Sieur de Huguet. But my elder brother had, of course, the right to the name, and we — well, we had trouble. So I called myself Le

Claire, which was my mother's family name. It is familiar?'

Yes, I had pulled the right string. The name was the offender. I looked up, and saw anger and suspicion flare over his scarred face like fire through brushwood. Here was an enemy, where but the moment before I had a friend.

'Familiar!' he echoed insolently. 'Yes, I know dozens of the name. It's as common as flies in August. I once had an hostler named Le Claire. Your mother must have been one of a large tribe.'

His tone was a premeditated slap, so that I smiled. He was trying to decide whether I was a fool or a good actor; so long as he was nonplussed, I could gain time. I smiled again.

'Monsieur, I should not have told you that story. I prove the truth of your words; I'm too open, I talk too much. But I felt that something displeased you in the name Le Claire, and, since you'd been kind to me, was moved to tell you the name was not really mine.'

It was a bold throw, but really I expected little of it. I was hoping to force him to disclose his hand. But my foolish words scored. He looked at me, distrust written large, but with a certain new respect. Somehow, either my innocence, or my ignorance, appealed. He was silent, and I felt he was going over our interview, summoning his impressions, deciding what to do with me.

'You have germs of kindness in you,' he said at last, and he spoke in the tone of one who has been much alone and so has learned to state conclu-

sions aloud. 'You have probably germs of honesty. Swear,' he stepped nearer, 'swear that your story is true.'

I think my face looked genuinely puzzled. 'Swear to what? You ask me to swear to my name?'

'To your name and to your purpose.'

Now if a thief has his code, a liar has his mental dead-line. My tongue thickened at thought of a false oath. Also I was as angry at his doubt of me as if I were, in truth, an honest man.

I took out my pipe. 'That is an impossible request — between gentlemen,' I said, and rammed tobacco into the bowl.

'You refuse?'

I considered. 'I refuse to be coerced.' My pipe had begun to draw, and I could clamp my lips tight on the stem and keep my mouth in order. 'But you have been kind. I will not swear — simply because it is a preposterous request, and because you ordered me. But I will give you my word as a gentleman. Will that suffice?'

I felt again that he wished to believe; also that the call of caste touched him. But he would not unbend; he would not even make himself say 'Yes.' He bowed stiffly.

I accepted that. I removed my pipe, and bowed in turn. 'My word as a gentleman, then, that my purpose is to reach the Sieur de Langlade and learn his business. Also, I assure you, my name is not Le Claire.'

He watched intently; distrust and belief were still doing battle. 'Ah, well!' he exclaimed. 'What does

it matter! Adieu, Monsieur Le Claire.' He nodded as one does to a servant. 'I wish you joy of what will meet you at La Baye.' He went back to his fire. He slammed his door in my face, turned me out of his part of the forest, and his last tone was incredibly bitter. I kept knife in hand as I backed away.

CHAPTER IV

MY SHADOW

I CAME to my Indians who were slouching like stretching slugs around the fire. It was dusk though the west was still scarlet. I looked at my motley followers, and at the menace of the night and the forest. I had nothing to shield me, nothing to depend on — not even my wit. And around the bend was a man who hated me.

I took my maps and held them to the firelight. They had been obtained by foul means, and much gold, from a *coureur de bois*, and were reliable. Yes, there was the portage the man with the scarred face had told me to make. He had said go north. I turned to Cochon.

'Tie the bales. We go at once.'

Astonishment made him look almost intelligent. 'Go where?'

I pointed to the glowing west. 'There. Make haste.'

He stood silent. A French peasant in this mood would have gaped. This Indian looked sullen. 'When the sun comes,' he grumbled. 'To-morrow. Then we go.'

'We go now.' I showed my musket. 'We go now — and quietly. Some one follows.'

'Who follows?'

There was mutiny in him. I suddenly laid down

the musket. I had been threatening, treating this Indian as if he were bred to subordination. Truly, I was slow to learn.

'Cochon,' I explained, 'the half-face man is my enemy. Can we hide from him? He has two Pawnees, who know the woods. Tell your men if they will travel to-night they shall have double measure of rum in the morning. If I am killed, you get only what we have here. If you bring me to La Baye, I have credit and will double what I promised.'

Cochon grunted, and turned to his men. They parleyed, but finally rose, and began to pick up the bales, and adjust the carrying straps. I watched Amaiou, the boy. He did less work than the others and talked more, and it came to me that he watched me quite as much as I did him. I motioned him toward me.

'Amaiou,' I demanded, 'you speak French?'

His name surprised him. Though the dusk veiled us, I knew his mouth opened to speak. Then he caught his guard, and merely grunted. But I was convinced he had started to say 'Yes.' I sent him back to work, and felt I owed something, after all, to my enemy.

We had a bad night of travel. We were carrying two canoes as well as merchandise, and if we had been white men our trail would have looked like a high road. As it was, it seemed we went quite noiselessly, and my spirits rose. But it was very hard. I was less burdened than my men, but what with slipping and straining over rotting ground and slimy logs, and pushing through woven thickets, I was

taxed till my pounding heart, and whistling breath, sounded louder than my footsteps. Yet I exulted in my men's skill, and tried to imitate. My jaw was somewhat set. I had been two months in the wilderness, and thought I had learned some things, yet that day I had, in all kindness, been called a fool. Well, I would learn.

The land we were traveling was wooded only in belts, and by daylight we reached open country. It was rolling land, and most fair, with scattered oaks, and spring flowers pushing up through tasselled grasses. Dawn, with its vision and safety, brought fresh life. The sky was pink-flushed and clear. I threw myself on a grassed hillock by a stream, and asked Cochon if we might rest there.

He grunted. 'Half-face can follow. We make tracks like the bull buffalo. But as you say.'

I considered. It was unlikely the man had even tried to pursue. Had I stayed near him, the irritation of my proximity might have put me in danger. But his anger was surely not of the sort that would lead him to track me, or he would have killed me as I stood with him there. For I was sure he was not a coward. I felt I had to fear his unexplained bursts of rage; not his calculation. And even had he tried to follow, he would go north. And we had gone west. No, we were out of danger.

So I gave the order to make camp, and sent the men to forage in the light timber fringing the stream. Amaiou stayed with me on the hillock. I had noticed during the night that he did the lighter work, and apparently took airs to himself with the older men.

I laid his ascendancy over his mates to his great laziness backed by some shrewdness. It was a combination I had seen effective with white men. And if this were his character, it was in keeping that he pretend to understand no French, and so escape my commands. I resolved to be rid of him as soon as possible.

I lay down. It was luxury to feel the spring sun on my aching bones, and I stretched out torpid as a lizard. I set myself to think out the events of the night before and come to some conclusion. Perhaps if I went step by step over the interview, I would arrive at some explanation of the man's change of front. It could hardly be he had taken vows to exterminate all who bore the name Le Claire. I smiled lazily at the grasses as I thought what that would mean. He would welter in slaughter, for as he said, the Le Claires were a large tribe. No, I must have offended him in some other way. I would try to remember. And having made up my mind to remember, I went sound asleep.

As events proved, I could not have slept long, but I traveled a nightmare of time and space. I was terribly exhausted, and the sun shone full and hot, so there was excuse for the fever and violence of my dream. I lived a lifetime with the man with the scarred face. He pursued me, shadowed me. At last, I could endure him no longer.

'Damnation!' I cried at him. 'I'll kill you, and be damned to you.'

I scrambled to my feet. I had shouted the words, and my voice waked me. I found myself standing,

shaking with anger, the echo of my curse in the air. I had spoken in English. Amaiou was watching me.

I sat down; dizzy from the sun's heat, my sudden waking, and the consciousness of what I had done. So I waited for mind and eyes to clear. Did Amaiou realize what had happened? He was undoubtedly watching, but that was not singular, for I had made a spectacle of myself. I doubted whether he was familiar enough with European tongues to know French from English. Still I could not be sure. I cursed fluently in French for his benefit, and signed him to come to me.

He came instantly, with a certain freedom and eagerness I could not but think was new. Indeed there was a change in his whole manner or I had been criminally unobservant before. He looked open, friendly. Before I could speak he pointed to the trail behind us. He started to retrace it, beckoning me to follow.

I stared, but obeyed. The land rose behind us in a succession of hills, and Amaiou led the way to the next rise. As he neared the top he dropped on his belly, signing me to do the same. I squirmed after him, and we waggled our way through the grass to where we could command the hill above.

I think I was prepared for what I saw. Outlined on the rise above us, perched insolently on the crest, so that each motion was silhouetted against the blue morning, were three figures. Two of them were lank, with naked bodies, and long straight hair. The third was clothed, and exquisitely graceful of line. They were standing, so I saw them as a frieze. Black

splashes on the ground I knew were canoes and bundles.

I stood up. I devoutly hoped our reptile ascent had escaped notice, for I felt futile as a child who tries concealment, and finds his elders laughing behind their palms. I thanked Amaiou with a nod and a twist of tobacco. Then I returned to my camp.

I found a small fire started, and the Indians preparing fish for the coals. Cochon told me they had netted the fish, and had seen some rabbits, but had not fired for fear Half-face might be on the trail.

'He is,' I said. 'He's not a league behind. It does not matter. We will not run. Build as big a fire as you like.'

Cochon deliberated. 'I will kill him. I will kill him, and you will give me the red shirt you said I could not have.'

'No, no, you are not to kill him. I forbid. You understand?'

'But he follows. He hunts you as I do the bear.'

I could only shake my head. 'If you kill him, I'll pour the rum on the ground,' I threatened. I knew no words to make this savage understand that I could not kill an enemy who paraded himself against the sky within musket shot. I knew I wrote myself down as a fool in Cochon's mind, and so had no influence with him beyond the buying power of my commodities.

I went to the fire, and ate sullenly, picking at the rank, bony fish, and drinking the muddy water; I was glad I had had moments of unconsciousness, troubled as they had been, for I would sleep no more

that day. I was nonplussed. Active danger sharpens a man's wits, and freshens him, but a hanging threat gets at his nerves, and turns him into a woman. The man apparently had no wish to kill me. But what was he after?

In turning west, I had lengthened my journey. My object now was to reach the Wisconsin-Fox water-way, and I realized, as I brooded over my breakfast, that I had best use every ounce of strength, and make haste. It was not alone that I was shadowed. I had an Indian who perhaps knew that I spoke English; who had me somewhat in his power. And my other Indians thought little of me. I must make for shelter like a panting hare.

So before midday we were afoot. The country was open, and we went quickly. That night we stopped by a cool stream, and used our guns recklessly, so we had venison for dinner. As the dusk turned blue-black we saw a camp-fire flare behind us, and I knew my Indians were shrugging. But I did not shrug — even mentally. I expected pursuit, and, though I liked it little, could do nothing. As I lay down that night Amaiou rolled his blanket to my feet, and stayed there. This was new for I had kept the Indians at a distance. But I did not disturb him. It came to me that I understood little, and that in the wilderness no move is without a purpose. I slept well, unhindered, and woke to a peaceful morning.

The next day we reached the Wisconsin, and eased the straps from our aching foreheads, wet our dried canoes, and became lords of the forest by being afloat

once more. With miles slipping under us, life became positive, exultant; before, it had been sodden unreality.

I could not mistake the Wisconsin, for it was wide, deep-banked and rushing. From there on, my maps were clear, the way marked as unmistakably as my own road in Devon. Except for the one portage to the Fox, it was all water-way, and as we ran with the current I felt no compunction in pushing the men. I, myself, had skill with the paddle, so could do my share, and that won me respect and emulation. Even Cochon stirred himself to keep pace.

But travel as we might we could not escape our shadow. When we lighted our evening fire an answering flame pricked out somewhere near; once, as we dallied somewhat, I saw three figures behind us in a long canoe; and we woke, the morning on the portage, to find that men had passed us in the night and left footprints in the dew. Scarcely a day passed but we were given to understand, in some fashion, that we were under observation. I stopped cudgeling my head for an explanation for I was convinced there was none except that I was dealing with an unbalanced mind. His pursuit of us seemed purposeless; a vagary of madness. But the situation was disturbing, menacing. It fretted me. It was like knowing, no matter how fair the moment, that the eye of a hostile animal was watching behind the leaves.

In spite of this I felt great exhilaration as my canoe worked northward. I knew my maps, and could name every landmark. I was in unbroken wilderness, many months' travel from my kind, yet I could say,

when I lay down at night, 'To-morrow we will reach Lake Winnebago; during the day we will find the Winnebago Indian camp on the west shore.'

The game had great zest, and I woke fresh to it each day. We seemed beyond the range of white men's experience, yet to the right was the tributary stream I had read of in La Hontan, yonder the Indian village Hennepin had described, and soon we would be on the upper reaches of the Fox where would be traces of the great encampment of the Sacs and Foxes; the place where they had held the river, and had, up to the last few years, exacted toll of passers-by. I knew what to expect, yet it was an ever-recurring wonder when the thing was there to greet me. I remembered how, as a boy in Rome, I had gone from Forum to catacombs with the same awed amazement I was showing now. It seemed incredible that what I had learned in dull study was really there.

I was thinking some of this the day before we made La Baye. The days had been smooth and most pleasurable. I had lost my urgency for speed, and we had traveled indolently on the smooth stretches of the lazy Fox. The water was blue-silvered, and the northland spring that fringed the river was fairer and gayer than anything I remembered; more winsome, even, than May in our hedgerows at home. Leaves were young and shining, herds of deer came to the water's edge, and wild crab-apple trees dropped pink showers so that the air was spicy.

All of my thought was pleasant; it was two days since I had seen our shadow, and I felt he had aban-

doned his vagary, and let us free. The river was so winding that at one place we traveled six hours with our starting-point still in sight, and I was sure we should have seen our pursuer if he were still following. So I lay down in the starlight with much content with my world, and had even a smile for Amaiou at my feet. Since the morning of the nightmare, it had pleasured the boy to make himself my bodyguard. He slept near me at night, and dogged my heels by day. I accepted his escort without comment, but I put little trust in his friendliness, for I did not understand him. I determined to cut him loose when I reached La Baye.

But the next morning I felt compunction for my distrust. Amaiou roused me, calling my name, and my first waking sensation was of the dismay in his face. It was barely dawn, the other Indians were sleeping, and I saw Amaiou had just wakened, for his eyes were drowsy. He hurried me to my feet, and pointed to the ground where I had been lying. I stared a moment, unseeing. The ground was undisturbed. Then I saw. I had used my rolled coat for a pillow, and there, on top of it, not two inches from where my head had lain, was a folded piece of birch bark impaled on a knife.

My heart gave a jump that shamed me. Was I child enough to feel fear now the thing was over? I seized knife and bark. I had to give a sharp pull for the blade was driven deep through the folds of the cloth. Shaken as I was, I stopped to shrug for the fate of my coat, then unfolded the bark. As I expected, there was a note on it written in charcoal.

'Monsieur,' it read, and the hand was free and flowing. 'A word with you. When you are inclined to speak of what you met in the forest, remember that this knife, which sticks harmlessly in your pillow, could quite as easily have found your heart. — MONSIEUR X.'

I pocketed the note, and examined the knife. It was a cheap dirk such as is used by the gross in the Indian trade. It was no identification, so I let it go. I was angry, puzzled, crestfallen; also somewhat on edge. But I could not but admire the man's woodcraft. Was the note that of a madman? I was not sure. It was theatrical, but many sane men are that. I sealed Amaiou to silence, and we made ready for the day.

CHAPTER V

LA BAYE

Badly as the day had begun, it was yet a great occasion. La Baye was but a few hours away. Elation brewed in me, a ferment of excitement and hope.

And again afloat, I could put away chagrin. Granted I had been dull to sleep while a man stepped about me; well, Amaiou had done the same. It comforted me, this once, to bracket myself with the Indian. I respected his shrewdness and woodcraft, and could excuse myself by his failure. 'A child in the bear pit,' I thought, remembering the man's comment. Well, bruin's paw had certainly been on my chest! But why had he withdrawn it? I jerked my mind away, and gave attention to the moment.

The day was hot, and by two o'clock thunder-clouds piled in the west. As we portaged around the Rapides des Pères — the mission, we saw, was abandoned — great drops splashed the dust, and as we slipped again to our canoes, the shower dropped on us, with lightning like a tropic tempest. We were too near La Baye to tarry, so pulled painted canvases over our bales, and dashed on.

Now the Fox River empties into La Baye des Puans, and the Langlade settlement was, I knew, near the mouth of the river. It was well in the afternoon when a widening of the stream showed that our moment was near. We made a dramatic entry. A

settler's cabin — the first in weeks — came in sight on the right bank of the river, and just then the clouds broke, and the sun dropped a dazzling shaft in front of us. A rainbow sprang out; a full half-circle, crossing the river in a high-arched span.

'See! A rainbow! A rainbow!' cried French voices. I saw a huddle of houses, and canoes and nets, drawn to the shore. Figures appeared on the steps of the low buildings. 'See the rainbow!'

I shall always remember it. The hurrying stream, the glitter of sunlight on wet leaves, the cluster of bark-roofed cabins dipping to the river so the water lapped at the steps, the chattering figures, gay neckerchiefed, a scarlet blanket here and there. We, ourselves, dashing in under a quivering band of color — an arch for our entry. A bird sang clear from a thicket. I raised myself, and gave a huzza of greeting.

We met answering shouts. Caps swung in air, voices cried welcome, and I heard the laugh of children. Our canoes turned inward toward the largest cabin where a young woman was standing, a crowing child in her arms. She smiled at me, and the grasp of her arms must have slackened, for the child stretched its hands to the rainbow, leaped upward, and fell splash into the river in front of my canoe. I touched the water side by side with the child. It was as if I had been expecting this, and was poised for the spring. Perhaps I was unconsciously prepared, for I had noticed the baby, its arms grasping at the colored bow. So it is small wonder I was ready and could catch the little one by its pink skirt and hold it aloft. A few strokes brought me to shore, and

hands grasped at the baby. But I kept hold on the child and scrambled up the steps to the woman. If she were the mother, she was still adorably childish and unformed.

I put the baby in her arms. 'To thank you for your smile to a stranger,' I bowed. 'See, only his skirt is wet. If only we elders could come off as easily when we grasp at rainbows.'

It was a foolish speech for a dripping man, but she did not find it absurd. She smiled again, but with no coquetry. Indeed, her look was uncomfortably like adoration. She fingered her baby jealously, piling kisses on its small crying mouth, and calling herself a wretch and a monster. I had not doubted her motherhood after the leap of her pouncing fingers on the child. But she did not forget me.

'Oh, but you are wet, Monsieur,' she shuddered, pulling her baby closer. 'Come in. I must give you dry clothes. Monsieur, all my life I shall thank you. Come in.'

She was absurdly young. Her lips scarlet, her eyes dazzling. I feared she was about to kiss my hand. So I made shift to turn the matter. Rills of water ran from my hair and finger-tips, and I wanted solitude. I was the center of a large group; women, voyageurs, children, Indians — too many to distinguish at a glance.

'The wetting is nothing,' I protested. 'The shower soaked me first; the river added little. Now I must speak to my Indians and make landing. But let me present myself.' I stooped to the pink bundle in her arms, and possessed myself of a small wet finger.

'Little Monsieur, I met you first; tell me your name that I may show my credentials.'

The mother laughed like a bobolink. 'Speak, darling. Cry Monsieur shame for his blindness. Tell him you're not a boy — oh, he should know that. But never mind, he has saved your life. Baby, tell him you are Catherine de Langlade.'

'Langlade!' I dropped the baby's hand, and bowed again, my wet hat trailing. 'Do I speak to Madame de Langlade?'

She bowed. 'Madame Charles de Langlade.' She turned to hand the baby to an Indian woman. 'See that she is dry and warm,' she said in French. Then she gave me full attention. 'My husband, Charles de Langlade is agent here. He will not have words sufficient to thank you for saving his child. He is away now. But he will come soon. And you must wait for him. You must wait for him to thank you. You were so swift, Monsieur! My precious one — she hardly touched the water. If you had not been here — Promise you will wait to see my husband, Monsieur.'

I laughed, and bent to her outstretched hand. 'I were a churl not to promise anything to such a tone; I would promise if a noose stood in my way. But, Madame, you need not urge, for I have come many leagues with but one object — to see your husband. I am Auguste Le Claire — late of Rouen. I have letters to Sieur de Langlade. Since he is not here, may I show them to you?'

She seized but one point in my speech. 'You will stay?'

'Assuredly I will stay.' I tried to smile, but of a sudden my teeth were chattering. The spring sun had vanished, and the water on my back was turning to ice.

'Charlotte,' called a voice. 'Is this your gratitude? Would you kill Monsieur? See, he is frozen.'

I looked for the speaker. She was a tall, dark girl, Madame Langlade in double. A little fuller, a little older, a little more open of glance, perhaps, but with the same ripe lips and gracious carriage. She looked at me fully, and I smiled my gratitude to her. We might be in the wilderness, but this girl had had suitors. She let me know it in her veiled look and lift of chin.

Madame Langlade started. 'My sister, Agatha Bourassa, Monseiur Le Claire,' she presented us nervously. Then she gave her attention to me. 'Yes, you are cold. Madame Langlade — this is Madame Langlade, my husband's mother — will give you dry clothes.'

A tall spare woman came forward. I knew Langlade's mother was an Indian, the daughter of Nissowaquet, an Ottawa chief, and I looked at her curiously, for I remembered she had borne many children by two husbands, and that in her son Charles she had bred a great man. I thought as she approached that I should have known her as a woman of parts even if she had not been labeled. She wore the Indian blanket, but carried it erectly. She had not grown fat like most of the squaws. Her face was lined, and there was gray in her carefully braided hair. She nodded me to follow, and I saw she had the manner of one

who has lived a long time, and is blunted to people and emotions. A wandering voyageur like myself was nothing to her. What that I had pulled her grandchild out of the water! Her own children must have tempted water and fire, and starvation itself. Rumor had it that her son Charles had been taken on war parties when he was but seven years old. I had a sudden realization of what she had lived through. No wonder she looked as if the present were stagnant. Yet her look might mean nothing. I had seen that expression before in primitive peoples, and found that while it suggested all fatalism and philosophy and acceptance of life, it frequently stood for little but vacancy of mind. But the woman piqued me, and I had great curiosity as to the Frenchman who had given her his name.

'Your husband — Augustine de Langlade — is he here?' I asked.

She shook her head. She took me to a small room with sleeping-bunks against the wall. 'No, he is at Michillimackinac,' she replied in fair French. 'He takes the business there; we do it here.' She gave me a new suit of woodman's clothing from the packet in the corner. 'I will send you water,' she said, and left me.

An Indian boy brought a kettle of water. His hair was dressed like the Indian who had been with the scarred-face man, so I said to myself he was a Pawnee. In spite of the rough room, I had the sense of having come into an establishment, of touching a hierarchy. I looked at the new suit, and decided to put it on although I had dry clothing in my bales.

But I wished to accept favors from Langlade's mother. I needed her liking.

A half hour later I came out to the main room. It was dusk, and a log blazed in the mud fireplace. Agatha Bourassa was standing by the doorway. She laughed openly at sight of my rough suit and great woolen boots. 'You look like an *engagé*,' she said, pointing to my feet, and she swung her own moccasined toe into view to point the difference. She had indeed a trim instep.

'I'm glad I look the *engagé*,' I said soberly. 'It's what I wish to be.' If she desired to play the game of coquetry, I would go slowly that she might have the sport of leading. 'Can you tell me where to find my men? I must look to my merchandise, and make camp.'

She flicked a look upward through her lashes. 'There's nothing for you to do. You're to stay here. Come, I'll show you where your bales are piled. We had them taken out of the wet canoes.'

I protested. 'But I must not stay here.'

'Not stay here!'

'Assuredly not. I must make camp as usual.'

'You will not stay here!' She dropped her little play of eyes and glance, and drew back. 'You said you came to see the Langlades. What is there afoot, or in your mind, that you cannot accept their hospitality? What do you mean, Monsieur?'

There was no affectation in her anger. I went over to her, bowed low, and pointed to my feet. 'Forgive, forgive,' I chanted. 'Mademoiselle, have pity. My mind is as heavy and witless as these boots I wear. I

meant only that I must not give trouble; must not intrude. If you wish me to stay — oh, you can't know the luxury of this room after months of the wilderness. Yet more than luxury is the companionship you offer; women like you and your sister. That is more, much more. Forgive me, Mademoiselle.'

She studied the toe of her moccasin. 'You have strange ways for this country,' she deliberated. 'I know no one just like you. You seem foreign in some way.'

I sighed. 'A man with a blundering foot is an alien everywhere. He is foreign even to his own kin. Mademoiselle, I am clumsy as a sheep. That is why I am a wanderer, and have no wife, no home. Forgive me, Mademoiselle. Come, forgive me, and let us go and see what has become of my poor belongings.' I held out my hand.

But she laughed with hands behind her. 'If you're a sheep, Monsieur, you have the tongue of a mocking-bird. 'Tis a strange combination; as strange as your rough shirt and your soft hands. No, no, Monsieur, no need to touch them to know how soft they are.' She laughed again as if from no reason but youth and gayety, and content with life. 'Come, I'll show you your things.'

I followed her out the back door into the dusk. We passed through a garden where maize was pricking upward, and crumpled green squash leaves were unfolding, and entered a long low warehouse. The front of the building hung over the water so we entered at the rear door.

She led the way to a corner. 'Here are your bales. They seem dry.'

I felt them over. 'Yes, the canvas protected them.' I touched her hand in the dark. It was soft and warm. I was tempted to forget what I had come for, and what I hoped to gain. I had not seen a woman in months, and had not known I missed them.

She did not draw away. 'Come, they're eating supper,' she said rather gently, and led the way outside.

Supper was spread out of doors. The rough table was of squared timbers, and we sat on logs balanced on crosspieces. There were fifteen of us at table, and I repeated the names somewhat vaguely. The Villeneuves and Bourassas, I gleaned, were relatives; the rest were *engagés* and retainers of various sorts. We ate by fire-shine, and Indians squatted around us. My own men were among them, their faces oily with eating and content.

I sat by Madame Langlade the younger — she was at the end of the table removed from sight of the Indians — and I found her as dimpled and fair by the light of star and fire as she had been by day. She was patting the little Catherine who lay on her lap, and I saw that with every caress she gave the child she added a kind thought for me. She watched me, smiled at me, and piled my plate with maize cakes and meat. It was awkward, but most comfortable. It was long since I had eaten food that had been supervised by a woman, and I ate with zest. Yet, indeed, the food was almost as simple as the Indian cooking of the trail. The stew came on in great kettles and we served ourselves in dishes of tin. It was the women who saved the picture from barbarism. The

table raised from the ground, and Madame Langlade's manners, formed the distinction between this meal and those I had eaten squatting by my fire.

Madame Langlade and I chatted constantly. 'Yes, there are several families of us,' she told me. 'The Jourdains live there,' and she pointed to lights shining through the trees.

'And the lights across the river? Is that the fort?'

She laughed to think I did not know. 'Where were your eyes this afternoon? Oh, but you were looking at my blessed Catherine. No, those are not houses across the river. Just the great camp of Menominees; King's Village, we call it. The fort is on that side the river, but further down, a mile away. We cannot see the lights.'

I ventured somewhat. 'The officers? I might know them.'

'There's only one — Lieutenant Coutrol. You'd like to see him?' She stopped to throw a bone to an Indian woman. 'Shall I send for him? He will be glad to come. He is ennuied; sick for something new. Yet, I don't know. I'd rather he saw you first in your own clothes.'

I laughed my thanks at her, but found my eyes on her sister. 'There should be no difficulty about bringing a young man here,' I observed. 'He should not need the bait of me — and my wardrobe.'

She followed my glance and shrugged. 'Agatha? Oh, Monsieur Coutrol is married. Then Agatha does not care. He is small and young. And there are other men. You see at Michillimackinac there were many

officers. We do not live here, Monsieur, except for the summer trade. Our home is Michillimackinac.'

I murmured to the effect that one could see she came from wider circles than this wilderness. What I wanted was talk of her husband, where he was, what his mission. But she said nothing of him, and I was afraid to risk an inch of ground by appearing to let my thought stray from the passing moment and the attraction of her presence.

'That farther light down the river?' I asked at length. 'I've been watching it. What is it?'

'A house.'

'A camp-fire in front of a house?'

'No, no, a house. A light in a house. That is Madame Rupert's. She has a much larger house than any of ours. She sits inside every night with that great light burning.'

I did not smile at the pettish tone. 'Who is Madame Rupert?' I asked gravely. 'Why does she sit inside with a great light burning? She would be better out in this soft starlight talking with — with you.'

Madame Langlade dimpled. She was indeed a pretty child, and not without shrewdness for she answered what I did not say. 'I am not jealous of Madame Rupert, poor thing,' she protested. 'Oh, never am I jealous of her. It is only the house. And Charles has promised I shall have a much bigger one. But he is always away. But I would not have Madame Rupert know how I feel. I would not hurt her feelings.'

I liked the kindness of her tone. 'Who is Madame Rupert, and why are you sorry for her?'

Madame Langlade slipped from her log seat, and handed me the sleeping baby. 'Will you carry her? I'm cold. And see, every one has left us. Madame Rupert? Oh, she studies all the time. You'll see her, but she'll be studying, studying. She won't know you're there.'

My interest waked. 'But who is she? Who is her husband?'

Madame Langlade was walking ahead. 'She has no husband — here.' She spoke over her shoulder. 'Take care of the steps. Follow Agatha.'

Once in the house, Madame Langlade became all mother, seized on Catherine, and disappeared. I was left alone with Agatha Bourassa. The fire was dying, and the girl's figure by the door was barely distinguishable. Yet I felt somehow that she expected something of me; that the next move was mine.

'You're to sleep in the loft,' she said. 'It is ready.'

I was relieved. 'I'll go at once. But I must get a packet from my bales in the warehouse.'

She made a step forward. 'Shall I go with you?'

I wanted her! Wanted to be with her. She pleased me; suited me singularly. But a devil of prudence entered me. Something of what Mr. Pitt had said of petticoats popped up in my mind. My sudden interest in this girl was probably not real. At all events it had no place in my plans, and must be sent packing. So I spoke quickly.

'No, Mademoiselle, by no means. I would not take you out in the dark. I can find my way. Good-night, Mademoiselle.'

She looked astonished, almost amused, and I was

hot with self-consciousness as I fumbled to the warehouse. I found the packet, but did it loiteringly so that the room was empty on my return. The heat of chagrin was still in my cheeks as I climbed to the loft.

The loft smelled of close air, but its warmth was agreeable. It was less a room than a hole under the bark roof with one shuttered window. It was cluttered and dusty, filled with a tangle of nets and dried squashes, but a rough bed was prepared, and a basin and gourd of water were in waiting. I gloated gratefully over these comforts.

It was a miracle that I should be among white people again, safe, protected. I stood by the window, and looked down on the river with great peace in my heart. Men, Indians, and dogs were asleep; the fire had died. Only the great light in the house called Madame Rupert's was still shining. I saw figures pass in what appeared to be a large room. I leaned out in the still night, and thought I heard music. Madame Rupert kept late hours. I remembered I had not found out who she was. I would ask the next day.

So I went to sleep in a French house, with a Frenchwoman's voice in my ears and French comfort and hospitality cradling me. Yet I dreamed of my wife Helen; of Helen, whose memory seldom came to me because I fought it away, because my thoughts of her brought only pain. I dreamed that she was singing to our son as she had often done when our lives were new together, and our boy a baby. 'Robin Adair' she was singing. I heard her croon it again and again.

CHAPTER VI

CONCERNING THE NAME LE CLAIRE

No cock-crow waking the next morning. The peace that companioned me as I lay down under a friendly roof, cushioned me in sleep till a late hour. A spider found me so immovable I was wakened by his web across my face. I brushed him aside and came back to my world slowly. I was supple from my soft bed; body and mind felt young.

I went to the window. The sun was well toward midday, and burnished the river so that the glare came hot in my eyes. I leaned from the casement, but there was no one to observe. Across the river the Menominee village was astir, and I heard yelping dogs, but on my own side the stream was little life. I looked up and down the line of huts and warehouses, some ten or twelve in all.

The morning sun brought out the smell of fresh pitch and I saw my own Indians working at the canvas.

I made what shift possible for a toilet, and hastened below. I came down the ladder awkwardly enough, for the great room was full of women, and I was no sailor trained at the yard-arm. I crawled decorously from rung to rung, and tangled my feet with my sword like a cat with a twine ball. Some one laughed behind me.

It was a rough laugh, and I struck the floor and

wheeled in a fine temper. But the women's faces were grave. In the door stood Amaiou, my Indian, his mouth stretched like a pike's jaw. The women looked at him reprovingly, with sidelong glances of apology to me. Their very poses cried 'Poor Monsieur,' also they seemed afraid of what I might do to the Indian.

I did nothing. I shrugged, motioned the fellow down the steps, and made my good-morrows to the group in the room. I had become very sure of my French overnight, and talked volubly. Agatha was nowhere about, but Madame Langlade was there to keep my wits stirred. I breakfasted on maize cakes, and was ready to free myself from the coil of women, and find where I stood. So I plead business with Cochon, got out of the house, and went down the path toward the mouth of the river.

Seen in the revealing daylight, the little settlement was almost as roughly built as a line of beavers' lodges. But it was not squalid. Spring was too newly come upon it all, and the frost of the long winter had been purifying. The earth was soft under me, a redbreast sang near, and a bubble of song was in my own throat. 'Robin Adair' had sung through my slumbers, and now I had ado to keep it from my lips.

I passed houses, warehouses, and a blacksmith's forge, but met no one. That suited me. Before I was enmeshed in further talk, I wished to reconnoiter. My French guise had not been really tested, and when it was I might need sudden shelter. Not that I feared I would be done away with quickly. I had Madame Langlade's friendship; she would protect me from too sudden a taking-off.

The house of the great light, that they had called Madame Rupert's, was the last of the row. It stood alone on a bold point of land, and beyond it, to the northeast, the ground was marshy. The house was square and well built, its logs placed evenly so that it stood in prim contrast to the sagging eaved cabins by the river. It was new, stiff, clean; a very Pharisee of a building.

I walked down the bank to the river. The beach was graveled, and swung in an undulating line. Across from me, a mile away, was the stockade of the fort, a French flag flying. The river between was filled with wild rice, the green young blades bending with the current. I saw a beached canoe, and walked toward it hoping for passage across the stream.

I walked cautiously for though I was on friendly soil the wilderness had bred secrecy in my muscles. Just beyond the canoe a smaller stream entered the Fox, and I hoped the owner of the canoe might be there for I heard Indian gutturals. I could not distinguish the words, but they sounded like a chant. I avoided the gravel, and choosing mud and soft dirt, climbed the bank.

Now I vaunted myself as accustomed to the unexpected so that neither corpse nor monster could trap me into a show of surprise. But what I saw nearly betrayed me into an exclamation. On the beach below were a young woman and an Indian. The woman sat on a red blanket thrown on the gravel. The Indian, who was dressed in trousers and an old military coat, squatted on his heels in front of her, his eyes fixed. 'Pegik, ninch, nissoue neou,' he was saying.

The woman repeated the sounds. She was as absorbed as he, and both evidently felt no need of caution. Her eyes did not leave his lips, and she was frowning with attention. She was young, and fair-haired, her skin burned red so that her eyes were discordantly blue. She was dressed in black, a straight gown of heavy cloth like a priest's robe. She was not a woman of the wilderness; neither was she of the town. I had seen no one like her.

'Pegik, ninch, nissoue,' she enunciated slowly. The Indian shook his head, and repeated the syllables. I saw her hands clench with effort as she tried the words once more. 'Madame Rupert studies all the time,' I recalled Madame Langlade's words. I backed carefully from my position and returning to the stream tramped noisily in the gravel. Then I climbed the bank a second time.

I found two faces looking up, and I saluted deeply. 'Madame Rupert?'

The woman bowed and rose. Standing on her red blanket with her straight black robe falling to her feet, she was curiously barbaric in effect; less a priestess than some woman of prophecy.

I went to her. 'Madame Rupert, I learned of you from Madame Langlade who gave me shelter last night. I am a wandering voyageur. My pardon for addressing you. I wished to ask the Indian here if he knew where I could get ferriage to the fort.' I spoke clumsily, rapidly, ashamed of my intrusion. It had been done on impulse and I felt it clownish.

She did not resent me though her manner was abstracted. 'Why, yes. Caron,' she indicated the

Indian, 'has a canoe. He can take you.' She turned to the Indian, still speaking in French: 'You will take Monsieur to the fort, Caron.'

He nodded. 'Yes, Madame.' He did not look at me.

She turned back, still carrying that abstracted inner look. I remembered Madame Langlade's 'She will look, but she will not see you.' But her tone was most courteous. 'You can take Caron now, Monsieur. I am through with him.'

I wished to protest, but her manner tied my tongue. 'Thank you,' I halted. 'Yet I accept unwillingly. This is not the way I would have it, Madame.'

She smiled gravely. 'I know. But it is quite right. You do not impose.' She looked at me fully for the first time. 'Why — why, do I know you?' Her tone altered.

I shook my head. 'Madame, I came but yesterday from the south.'

She gazed attentively. 'You are recently from France, Monsieur?'

There I could tell the truth. 'I left Paris in February.'

'In February,' she meditated. She still studied me with more attention than I, or my ostensible errand, warranted. Her greeting had been singularly detached. Now she was showing more interest than I liked. I started to move away.

'In Paris in February,' she repeated. 'What war news do you bring, Monsieur?' Her tone was absolutely perfunctory. I felt she had much later news than I could give with my budget of gossip many

months stale. Yet what did she want? She was an odd woman; disconcerting.

'All my information is long outlawed,' I replied. 'I have been months en route. They should have later news at the fort?'

'Possibly,' she answered. I could not deflect her eyes. She was bending on me a curious, bewildered scrutiny, as intent as the study she had given the Indian words. Yet her look was somehow impersonal. She put her hand to her forehead. 'I may have met you in Paris. Will you tell me your name, Monsieur?'

I was annoyed. Of course I should have given my name at once. But somehow my lie had stuck, and now, on demand, it came out haltingly.

'Le Claire,' I mumbled, as churlish as a wolf in a corner. 'I am Auguste Le Claire of Rouen, Madame.'

I do not know quite what happened. Her hands flew to her throat. She stepped forward waveringly, with a little sound of protest, then sank in a heap on the red blanket, her head at my feet. It was shocking that life could go out of her vivid face so quickly.

I did not stop to touch her. I jumped to the river, filled my hat with water, then returned and lifted her head in my arms. The Indian watched sullenly and drew his knife, so I sent him for more water, though I did not need it.

But I was sore put to it with the woman. I had had experience with illness, and saw her unconsciousness was deep. A moment before she had been full-pulsed, charged with life. How had I cut down into the foundations to bring her to this all in a moment? Her

face was gray under its red, and I saw now that it was pinched across the temples, and that, young as she was, her mouth had the drawn lines of suffering.

I put more water on her forehead, and she stirred, at last; her breath struggling to resume its routine. I spoke for the first time. 'Please lie still. You are safe, and will be better in a moment. Don't try to talk.'

She obeyed me. The weight on my arm did not shift. She kept her eyes closed, and I saw her effort to breathe regularly. When her color returned, I expected some motion from her, but for a long moment none came. I had an uncomfortable feeling that, though her eyes were closed, she had come back to herself, and was thinking, thinking. So I was not surprised, when she at last looked up, to see she had regained full consciousness and memory.

She spoke without prelude. 'You say your name is Le Claire?'

Her blue eyes were full on me at mercilessly short range. It was an unexpected attack for I had forgotten myself in anxiety for her. I stiffened the muscles of my throat. 'So I said, Madame.'

She pondered the form of my answer. She studied me relentlessly, lying on my arm but a foot from my face. She was as unconscious of her position as she was careless of it. Whatever the issue between us we measured wits, eye to eye. No, I am wrong; it was not a measuring of wits so much as a weighing of truth and knowledge. Her eyes held nothing but a demand for daylight, for understanding. Whatever she might read in my face seemed of extraordinary moment to her. What she found there, Heaven knows!

She did not find candor, and she knew it. So after a moment she dropped her eyes, and raised from my arm.

She sat propped on an elbow, and I rolled the blanket, and put it behind her. She looked up. 'You do not ask what this is all about, Monsieur.'

Bewildered and anxious as I was, I was somehow acutely sorry for her. 'Don't try to talk of it!' I begged.

She shook her head impatiently, but did not look away. 'You think I knew some one called Le Claire?' she pursued.

'That is the simplest explanation, Madame.'

'It is the true one. Yet there is more — I think — I cannot quite remember —' She frowned as she had at the Indian, trying to focus her mind. 'I think —' she went on. Then she caught her breath. 'Oh!' she cried sharply. 'Oh, oh, I see!' She hid her face in her hands and I thought she might be faint, and started toward her but when she raised her head, her face, though pale, was alive with amazement.

'I see!' she repeated. 'I see.'

Now, what did she see? Evidently she thought she recognized me. I was sure she did not. John Sargent of London was not known to women of fashion in Paris, and I had a growing feeling that this woman, odd as she was, had power and place. Her mind must be unbalanced. But madwoman or not, I disliked her questions. I waited her cue.

She gave it. She drew her breath as if come to an understanding with herself, and rose. She swayed a

little, so that I offered my arm that she might rest her fingers on it.

'It is the sun,' she explained. 'I will be myself in a moment. I'm sorry to have given you this scene, Monsieur Le Claire.' Her voice was smooth, insincere. She was utterly changed. She had been three women in these few moments, and I liked this last rôle least of all. It was as false as I knew myself to be.

I brought water in my drinking-cup, and adding a little rum from my flask, bade her drink. Then I stood and waited.

She eyed me over the rim of the cup. 'You will be here long, Monsieur Le Claire?'

'I am undecided. Yet I expect to be here for some time, Madame.'

'I see.' She seemed fond of these two words, and their smooth insolence made me boil. She gave me back my cup with brief acknowledgment. 'Monsieur,' she went on, 'since you are to stay here — the settlement is very small — suppose we say nothing of this episode.'

I had difficulty in hiding my relief, for I had feared she would publish her suspicions. But I bowed as my only discreet answer.

'I will ask Caron not to talk,' she went on. She turned to the Indian. 'Caron, I have been ill, and Monsieur is kind. He is my friend.' She put out her hand, and let it rest in mine. 'But the bird that is wounded flutters away, and tries to hide its weakness. So with me; I would not let people see I have been hurt. Caron, I ask you to be the bush where

the wounded bird hides. Will you cover me and say nothing?'

The Indian grunted. Bereft of his tribal blanket he had nothing to shroud his face, and he dropped his chin on his breast.

Madame Rupert looked at me. 'He will be silent. Caron, will you now take Monsieur to the fort?'

The Indian grunted again, and started to the canoe. It was plain he was devoted to her — even though he brought no suavity to the task.

Madame Rupert started away. 'Adieu,' she said over her shoulder. While the Indian was with us the glances she gave me had been kind. Now her look held me at bay. With her black dress, and red blanket, her blue eyes in her tanned red skin, and her straying light hair, she was indeed a strange figure. My rage at her incomprehensibility, her secrecy, her unlikeness to any woman I had known, rose in me. I bowed with heels together, and followed the Indian to the canoe.

CHAPTER VII

FORT SAINT FRANCIS

It was a short trip to the fort in Caron's light canoe, but quite long enough for me to realize I was a blundering fool and that my proper place was back in a small safe room on the Strand, computing my modest rent-roll, and going to White's for dinner. At each point my wits led me astray! Why the absurd name Le Claire! It was, of course, as familiar to other ears as to mine. And Auguste! Hardly a page or stable boy, but answered to that at baptism. Had I been masquerading in England would I have called myself John Jones? I cursed roundly.

And all beauty had gone from the day. The sun blazed on the water, and I felt dulled and nauseated by the heat. Truly Madame Rupert had stirred me deeply. It was one thing to admit myself an impostor, quite another to be detected as one, and to have to stand and grin like a trapped ape. I had not been so disturbed and out of tune in all my journey.

Caron beached the canoe and pointed to the entrance of the fort. He had paddled in silence, and now only grunted when I gave him some gay beads I had in my pocket. If he had French at command, he saved it for happier moments. I nodded good-bye, and entered the fort.

One has curious goals. I entered the stockade dispirited, and for the moment almost uninterested.

Yet this was a moment of achievement; I had worked for this. I stood on the small black dot I had shown Mr. Pitt. I was at Fort Saint Francis.

A small snake lay asleep in my path, and I stepped over it. I was Indian enough already not to anger the Manitou by killing it. I had need to propitiate my fortune. A great sticky fly buzzed in my face, and I had trouble dislodging it. I did not find the day fair, nor the air to my liking, even though what I saw should have astonished and pleased me and sent my heart pumping.

A rotten stockade enclosed a huddle of squalid cabins. One was long, well shuttered, and stoutly built though filthy; the others were crude and shambling. A soldier with a musket was on duty. He could hardly be said to walk; he sprawled indolently like a fat spider.

I asked for Lieutenant Coutrol, and the man pointed to one of the cabins. He did not attend me, and I walked to the open door and looked in. The room was rough and bare, an unmade bed in a corner, and a litter of camp utensils cluttering the floor. A young officer in a travel-stained uniform dozed in a log-hewn chair in front of a home-made table covered with papers.

I hesitated. It seemed my fortune in this country to come upon every one unaware. I must wake this man and present my name. When I said 'Le Claire' would he faint, or flourish pistols? I must see. I rapped my sword hilt on the open door.

The man woke quickly, and jumped to his feet. He came forward with a look of genuine interest, and

welcome, and I had time to like his youth, and his frank smile.

'Lieutenant Coutrol?' I asked. 'I am Auguste Le Claire. I arrived last night. I have a letter to you from the Intendant.'

I felt I shouted 'Le Claire.' I could not get the words out now without propelling them like bullets. But the Lieutenant's pleasant phlegmatic face did not alter. He greeted me warmly, called me Le Claire without a blush, and looked at my letter.

It was a good letter. It was forged, and I had seen to it that it handled me well. It commended me to the commandants of the western forts, and bore the seal of the Intendant at Montreal. I had no fear of its reception; wording and penmanship, it was a masterpiece. A skilled man had done it, and he had many documents to copy.

Lieutenant Coutrol ran it over without question. Then he plied me with welcome and inquiries. It was not hard to play my rôle for he was too eager for talk to pay much attention to my answers. We drank together, condemned the war policy, and wagged our heads over corruption in high places. Then I dared come to the meat of the matter, and ask about de Langlade.

'I spent the night under his roof,' I explained, 'but learned nothing of his movements.'

Coutrol nodded. 'Those women are well drilled. And Langlade confides in no one. But I know he went west. You came from the south?'

'Yes, by the Fox River.' That recalled me. 'Tell me, has any one else named Le Claire been here lately? Is the name familiar?'

He shook his head. 'I think not. Why?'

'I thought my Indian said as much,' I answered indifferently; 'but I find it hard to understand them. I have an Indian who I think speaks French — but he says not. What would you make of that?'

Coutrol shrugged. 'They are sly devils.' He tugged at his fair mustache, his thoughts elsewhere. He looked at me. 'You are from Paris?'

'Rouen.'

'Rouen,' he meditated. 'I've never been there. Still, it is near Paris, and should not be different; you see —' He shrugged again. 'I'm trying to place your accent,' he added frankly.

I smiled at him. 'I'll help you. I was born in Dublin.'

He opened his eyes at that. 'Huguenot?' he ventured.

I shook my head. 'Not in the present generation. It was my ancestors who found Ireland a convenient port. So you get the twist in my speech?'

'A little. Not that it's disagreeable,' he disclaimed courteously.

I frowned. 'I do not like it,' I said testily. And indeed I spoke the truth. 'Yet 'tis of small moment. I'd trade my accent, and much to boot, to know the doggerels that are talked here. You speak them?'

'A little. We've a good interpreter — Caron.'

'He brought me over. He's a Menominee?'

'A half-breed. His father was a French trader.'

'A half-breed? Does he pass as Indian? Langlade does not.'

'The white blood is on top with Langlade. He

uses his strain of Ottawa to further his French plans. It's the other way about with Caron. He lives with the Menominees.' Coutrol spoke politely, but with a yawn in his voice. It was plain that Indians bored him. He turned to questions of Pompadour and Versailles.

I could give him the gossip of the street. I had seen to it that I was well saturated with the slime of the court, and could drip it out to him now. But I interspersed questions, and at last made my way to Madame Rupert.'

'Tell me about her,' I asked boldly. 'I met her with Caron this morning. Who is she? Where is her husband?'

Coutrol rose. 'I must see my sergeant. Madame Rupert? Oh, she's studying Indian with Caron. Will you look around the place?'

I felt obstinate, and would not bend a leg to follow. 'Is Madame Rupert a widow?' I persisted.

Coutrol examined his nails — which, indeed, needed attention. 'She has no husband here,' he parroted. He gave me a badgered look and I dropped questioning. I would not anger him, and add to my list of unexplained enemies. No, if the woman were the pet mystery of the settlement, I would walk softly. So I followed the lieutenant to the door, and expressed great interest in his regiment.

'Where do you quarter your men?' I asked.

He gave a wry look. 'Quarter them?' he growled. Then he laughed. 'Look.' He threw open the door of one of the dissolute-looking cabins. 'There!' On the floor within were two double pallets of reeds.

I looked at the two beds. 'Four men?' I was full as startled as Coutrol could have wished.

'Four men.' He snapped his thumbs. 'Four men, a sergeant and thirteen canoes. That is my equipment.'

So this was the armament that stood between England and the West! For a moment my blood danced, and my thought clamored at Mr. Pitt for what I had already refused — for troops, for power. Then I looked back down the river at Langlade's cabins, and came back to sanity. So long as five Indian tribes stood guard, one officer was sufficient to stand as symbol for France. I wondered what Coutrol felt as figure-head. What he seemed to feel principally was the heat, which he growled at as unseemly for the season. He also showed a somewhat indolent pleasure in finding a fresh ear and tongue in me.

We walked around the enclosure, and down to the lapping river. The large shuttered building I passed without comment. I knew the situation. If Coutrol were feathering his nest as well as his predecessors had done there were furs enough locked in that greasy warehouse to support the regiments of Montreal. But that was not my business. I feigned interest in the landscape, and tried to get away.

That was not easy, for Coutrol was pressing. He wanted to tell me of his wife in Montreal, his dogs, his taste for racing. I am not sure he liked me, for I puzzled him, but he was sick for companionship, and held to me fretfully, insisting that I bring my bales and stay at the fort. That I was not ready to

do. Illogical as it was, I had some honor in the matter. I said I wished to be near Langlade, and was stanch in my refusal. But indeed it was like loosing the clinging arms of a sweetheart to get away.

Once out of the fort, I took the river path, and went south. I thought to go to the Menominee village, reconnoiter, and then be ferried to the Langlade side. I walked gayly, for my thought was fresh though my feet were still blistered from the trail.

But I had not gone many paces when a whistle called me. A canoe was rocking in the reeds close to my path, and in it sat Agatha Bourassa. She put out a brown shapely arm.

'Monsieur, you have kept me waiting.'

I laughed. I did not know I could feel so young. 'I have been trying to come for hours,' I protested, hand on heart. 'At every call I tried to get away.'

She threw back her braids which were loose like an Indian girl's. 'Who called?' she demanded.

I sighed to make her look at me. 'Who knows!' I waved my hand broadly. 'Perhaps you called; perhaps the river; perhaps the spirit of home. But something has been calling me to the Langlade house all the afternoon, and I have had to fight to resist.'

She wrinkled her nose like a spoiled child. 'Your dinner called. You look as famished as a bear in spring. I've brought you something. Get in.'

I stood with a toe on the canoe rail. 'I was going to the Menominee camp,' I remarked. 'I was on the way.'

She looked up; her red lips pushed forward. 'You were going — but now?'

I stepped into the canoe, and took the paddles. 'And now who knows where I'm going?' I said ruefully. 'The way is not charted.'

She smiled the double meaning one side, and leaning forward took the paddles. 'You are passenger. See what I brought you.' She let the canoe drift, and untying a package, showed me maize cakes and dried meat wrapped in a clean white cloth.

I looked at it, and at her. 'Thank you.' I was curiously touched. Somehow I could say no more.

She handed me the package. 'You were hungry?'

'Very.'

'And Coutrol gave you nothing! He's a dolt, that man! A villain.' She swept us into the current, and let us drift by the fort. 'I hope he's looking. Eat now, that he may see.'

I obeyed with delight. Hungry as I was, I had room for a sense of the picture, of the beauty of the girl, and the river, and the line of whimsy that ran through the whole affair. We could do nothing simply, it seemed. I was even to eat like a puppet in a pantomime. The fair-haired lieutenant was certainly nothing so significant as a villain and I had no inclination to discredit him, yet I munched with gusto, an eye on the fort. If Coutrol saw me, it would leave him untouched, and put me in the wrong, letting a woman paddle while I played the greedy school-boy. But I was willing to be absurd to pleasure the girl before me. Accepting food in the wilderness lays one under bonds.

We drifted down the river with rushes whispering. The stream was shallow and wide where it debouched

into La Baye des Puans, and to the north I had a fine panorama of the broad reaches of the bay with low-lying green hills spreading fanwise. I looked somewhat hungrily. Up there, over that fair blue water, lay Michillimackinac, the heart that fed this artery of travel and emprise. I stood on the threshold. Had another Englishman ever been where I stood now? Then I recalled myself to the girl who had given me food.

I picked up the extra paddle and steered to a small island that lay in the river's mouth. 'Rest a moment,' I said, as I beached the canoe, 'I'll paddle back against the stream.'

The girl stepped out, and flung herself down. She stretched luxuriously, her fingers grasping at the soft air like tiger's claws, folding and unfolding.

'It's warm,' she murmured. 'But such happy air, so happy.'

I stood beside her. 'It is indeed happy air,' I echoed. The little islet was scarce bigger than a dining-board, but was well cushioned with plumy green, and bore a cluster of swaying birch trees as graceful as osprey plumes in a grand dame's hair. I looked around hoping for a floweret to give the girl, but saw instead a blur of gray ash. I went down on my knees.

I burrowed for a moment in grass and stones, while the girl stood silent. Then I rose. 'It was nothing. Shall we go?'

'But what was it?' she insisted.

'Only traces of a fire — built last night, I should say. The ashes were covered with such care it made me curious.'

She shrugged. 'Who would camp here, with the settlement so near! Some one is hiding.' She stepped into the canoe. 'How does it seem to live in Paris?' she mumbled as I pushed off.

'You mean?'

'How does it seem to live comfortably — secure of your roof, and your hair! All my life I've lived on the edge of a knife-blade. That fire now — some one is skulking.'

I laughed at her. 'Pretense! You're pleased at finding that fire. It whets your interest. You've lived on your knife-blade so long you're a toper for excitement. Else why did you come with me, a stranger, to-day?'

She looked at me frankly. 'You were hungry. And then I knew you were the right kind of man. I could see.'

I shook my head at her, but knew she was right. She could see. She should know men — this girl. But I had a flitting wonder as to whether the sobriety of my face or the smudge of gray in my hair had acted as voucher.

I rowed back by the opening of the sluggish stream that came from the southeast. 'What do you call it?'

'Manitou is the Indian name. We call it Rivière du Diable.'

I smiled. Remembering the morning, the French name was appropriate. But the girl was looking at me.

'You've been there!' she burst out. 'The clay on your boots!'

'Is there a special clay there?'

'Yes.'

I looked at my boots. The clay was dark red, and shiny. 'Yes, I was at the mouth of the river this morning. I met Madame Rupert there.'

'You saw her? She talked to you?'

'Yes. Why not?'

The girl trailed her fingers in the water. 'She does not care to talk to strangers,' she remarked with her eyes down.

I paddled, thinking hard. If this Madame Rupert persisted in her delusion that she knew me, I must be armed on my own side. I must put away any thinness of skin as to prying into a woman's secrets, and find out about her. I leaned to the girl.

'Tell me about Madame Rupert.'

'Why?'

'She interests me. Why is she here?'

'She's studying the Indian language.'

I snapped my fingers. 'She could study Indian at Quebec; you jest, Mademoiselle.'

The girl looked down. 'It's not my fault.'

'You do not wish to tell me?'

She glanced up then, but with half-shut eyes. 'I might wish to tell, but —'

'But you cannot?'

'But I cannot.'

I shut my teeth. This was an absurd wall. 'Tell me one thing,' I spit out viciously, 'and I promise to ask no more. Is the woman's mind unbalanced? Is she insane?'

The girl laughed at that. 'No, no!' And she laughed again.

I was nettled, and paddled in silence. 'Look, there's Madame Rupert now,' the girl broke in. 'See, there on the shore.'

I could not but look. The woman, a straight black figure, stood alone near her house, gazing off to the west where white clouds were piling. The coolness of late afternoon was coming as refreshment, and she stretched her arms to the reviving air. Just then she saw us, and bowed in greeting.

The girl looked over at me. 'Did you see her smile? She has never done that before.' She spoke somewhat wistfully.

I had nothing to say in return. Impatience was hot in me. The western clouds were pink with sunset, and my first day at La Baye nearly over. What had I for it! A melodrama with one woman, and an hour of fruitless idleness with another. Truly if this were a petticoat war I was carrying its principles into the wilderness. I was very silent as I left the girl at the Langlade house, even though the crumbs of maize cake which clung to my knees rested yet more clearly on my conscience.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING THREE MATTERS

My second night under a French roof I heard no Scotch love-songs. Instead I dreamed of an Indian who opened his eyes widely and laughed; laughed with his teeth showing like a Sussex yokel. And all because I was no monkey to crawl down a ladder without tangling my heels. I dreamed the scene over, only this time I went to Amaiou to cuff his ears, but before I could reach him he spoke in English, and called me 'master.' I reflected when I woke that the air of New France fostered a Gallic imagination.

That second morning I was abroad betimes. I could not eat the bread of French hospitality, and keep peace with myself. So I bargained with Madame Langlade for permission to pitch my belongings up the river. She let me go reluctantly, for her hands were always straining toward me full of favors, and I made my escape only under condition that I permit her husband to do something for me on his return. 'You saved our baby's life,' she would repeat. I could but pat the little Catherine each time I passed her. Perhaps some of the caresses were for herself, for she was a laughing baby, but so well had she served me, my heart would have inclined to her had she been a very wasp of an infant.

The morning was again fair; less warm. I chose my camp, and looked at the place with keen satisfaction.

I had worked for the privilege of making this roof in the wilderness, and found the achievement worth while. I had owned land and houses. None had pleasured me more than this patch of gravel and turf and tamarack that was mine only as a bird owns his bough.

I set men to work building an excuse for a cabin. My Indians were useless as carpenters, but I engaged the blacksmith and two other men. I had not wasted the previous evening, and was in touch with the handful of Frenchmen in the settlement. The three men worked slowly, with much laughter, and jets of talk like eddies on the river. The sunshine, the spring, the smell of fresh-cut trees, all mingled in a heady draught. I had thought I was coming to a dour land, yet now, in the May witchery, it was as if the world were treading to a madrigal.

Agatha Bourassa sat on the bank, and played at knitting while she watched the men. A kitten would have been as useful — but less graceful. At last she gave over the pretense of work, and, tangling the red wools into a mat clapped them on her black braids as shelter from the sun. The knitting-needles made shining horns, and she laughed like a blackbird at her reflection. The Indian woman with her sewed stolidly, only lifting her eyes to pick up the knitting-needles when they fell from the French girl's hair.

I had noticed this Indian from the first. She was young — though she had a child about three years old — and in spite of a sullen heaviness of mouth that marred her, I thought her attractive. I had lived in India, so could see beauty in a dark face, and

this girl was delicately modeled, and had fine eyes. Ahnawa, they called her, and I learned she was an Ottawa relative of the Langlades. As she sat stitching gloomily in the sunlight, she rejoiced my eyes as much in her way as Agatha Bourassa in hers. Yet perhaps neither of them pleased me as much as did the Indian woman's boy. He was rarely beautiful and straight-limbed, and his hair was light and curly. Even before I learned his name was Nicholas I was sure he had a French father.

These were but the first of my visitors. I held a levee while my foundation logs were being squared. Madame Langlade came with her baby, and a train of squaws followed; Coutrol rowed over from the fort, and every hanger-on in the settlement lolled and chaffered in the sun. It was a fête, and Indian women brought us beech-nut cakes, and syrup from the maple trees. Was Europe at war, and my own mind full of sinister purpose? In the face of this simple merrymaking I had to remind myself I was in an alien land and no one could dispassionately call my life worth a penny's ransom. For a moment I forgot Madame Rupert, and the shadowing man of the trail.

I was busy with the men so did not notice Madame Rupert's arrival. When I saw her first she was standing by Madame Langlade, and at sight of her straight black figure, the bound of my heart warned me I feared her. A mystery in a woman; a mystery in which I seemed involved! This was indeed a hard trick of fate. I greeted her stiffly.

She held out her hand. She had surely as many

sides as a man has prejudices. On our first meeting I had found her preoccupied, then too vividly interested, then menacing. She had seemed ridden with emotion, surcharged. I thought of her as an explosive which I had not patience to handle gingerly, and had an irritated desire to explode her mine and see what shock it could occasion. I wanted to clear my pitfalls, try them out. Yet I knew this was folly.

But now, her hand in mine, my emotion appeared absurd. For this woman was neither vivid nor scornful. Sad, yes, but gentle. And her wistful look seemed to forget herself, and be sorry for me. Preposterous, of course, but disarming. I told myself she was a capable actress.

Her coming quieted the company; blighted it, after a fashion. There were no more songs from the loungers, Agatha sat upright with folded hands and narrowed eyes, and Madame Langlade checked her thrush-like chatter, and talked primly; it was like seeing a hedgerow bird try to be a macaw. If Madame Rupert remarked that her arrival transformed the company into marionettes, she carried the situation well. She stood slender and still, her small face cleanly modeled. To-day her fair hair was smooth and shining, though I saw it wished to curl. Enemy or not, my thought called her gallant, and there was man enough in me to admit that she held her head nobly. But I wished none of her. She called the little half-breed Nicholas and stood with her hand in his hair while he nestled to her. His mother, the Indian woman, Ahnawa, rose and walked away.

She, too, was awry. It was an odd situation. Well, it was none of mine.

The afternoon was waning before I could get by myself, for my visit to the fort had saddled me with baggage it took wit to shift. The happy vacancy of Coutrol's mind required he have some one within earshot, and he clung to me as a boy to a drum. Once free of him, I pelted to my canoe and pushed off. I heard Coutrol shout he would go with me, but I paddled violently and got away.

I went down river with the stream. I knew eyes were looking, and wished it. A canoe on that stretch was as conspicuous as a chariot on a highway, and any one spying could not miss me. I passed the fort, pushed through the reeds at the river's mouth, and rowed to the small island where I had seen traces of a fire. There I landed, and looked the ground over; grass, birches, and flowerets were undisturbed. I went back and sat by my canoe.

I waited there a half hour, long enough for any one to follow. But no one came. Then I rose, and taking a note from my pocket drove it with a sharpened stick into the ground. The note was brief.

'Monsieur X, will you meet me here to-morrow evening? You spared my life so should be willing to tell me what you want of me. Let us talk this out. — Auguste Le Claire.'

I gave a final look to see the note securely fastened, then reëmbarked. I had sent a far arrow, but in a world of uncertainty any shot might find the target, and all might go astray.

Early dusk when I reached the settlement. My Indians were squatting by my new building. They had a proprietary air, and I saw the time ripe to tell them I had had enough of their service. I approached Cochon to that effect, telling him the toll of merchandise and rum would be ready on the morrow, at which time they could leave.

But Cochon was unimpressed. He grunted that they would take their pay in the morning, and that he expected my red shirt, but that they would not leave; they liked La Baye. I answered with emphasis that they should be off within the day — to all of which he listened without deigning reply.

This was annoying. I looked at the stolid group, and saw they had the better of me. The wilderness was not mine but theirs. And why should it concern me where they stayed? I was still incurably the Englishman, trying to break these savages into the subservience it takes centuries of vassaldom to produce. I shrugged and concluded not to parley.

I noticed Amaiou as we talked. My speech was with Cochon, but the younger Indian listened intently, and as I walked away he followed and touched my elbow.

I stopped. 'What do you want, Amaiou?' I spoke in Algonquin which is the basis of many dialects. I had been studying for months and could get through a few sentences. During the journey I had concealed the little I knew, hoping for useful eavesdropping. But the Indians had kept to themselves so I had learned little. Now I waited anxiously to see

whether the sounds I made would convey anything to Amaiou's mind.

Apparently they did. He opened his eyes in his curious un-Indian fashion, and replied eagerly in Algonquin. Then, as my dulled face showed how little I understood, he brought his speech to carefully disjointed syllables. I made out the gist of his talk. He intended to stay with me. He had adopted me as a father to dry up his tears for his own dead. My blanket should be his; he would work for me as a son. I should share all he had to the last handful of meal.

I listened with ears and mind stretched wide. An Indian never speaks lightly of adoption, and under this slow verbiage there was feeling. I looked at the lank-limbed boy of a race so alien I hardly felt them human, and saw that by some strange twist of fortune he cared for me. It was useless to ask myself why he cared. The fact was there. I could not read these savages. I could get hold of their loves as little as I could grasp the secret of their hatreds, but certain large simplicities I could rely on. When Amaiou called himself son, I had found a shield between myself and the wilderness.

So I answered as best I could, and told him he might remain and we would share the sun and wind together. I was glad the dark had fallen, for I feared there was withdrawal in my face. I had the faults of my blood, and in spite of knowing better, race bigotry was strong in me. Yet I knew that instead of weighing the boy's advances, I should have clapped him to my heart. I had thought to sleep

alone in my pine cabin since I had no one to trust. Now I had a guard inside the threshold that insured a peaceful pillow.

At the Langlades' I found Agatha at the door. I pointed to Amaiou, a few paces behind. 'My bodyguard, or jailer? He has adopted me. Tell me, will he always follow?'

The fire shone from within and showed the girl's lifted brows. 'I wonder why you pretend to know less than you do.'

That tickled my vanity. 'You might explain.'

But she was in solemn mood. 'You pretend to be very simple,' she said, and would not look at me. 'You say you know nothing of this life. Yet you contrive everything for your advantage.'

'If you mean I have imposed on your sister's hospitality —' I spoke hotly for knowing myself for what I was, the debt of entertainment weighed. But I broke off in mid-sentence. 'Forgive me. You did not mean that.'

She turned. 'No, I did not mean that.' Her tone was colorless, but her eyes were clouded and suspicious.

I held out my hand. 'You have been very kind — you, and your kin. If I am oppressed by it, it is because I can do nothing in return. You have been generous, not only of hospitality, but of trust. And so I snap like an ungrateful cur, because I am sensitive under obligation. Now show you bear no rancor by telling me what you mean.'

There was no malice in her. She smiled in full absolution. Yet she did not answer at once, and when

she did she summed the situation for herself rather than me. 'I don't understand you,' she meditated.

'In what way?'

She looked me over as she found words. 'You would have us think you inexperienced. Yet I've watched you to-day and have never seen a man handle other men better — not even Charles de Langlade.'

She had aged. This was no frolicsome kitten, but a critical woman with observant eyes. I was in danger but my vanity was again pleased.

'You are kind,' I said. 'If it is kind to tell a man that he has in him that combination of ferret and bully which makes what we call a leader. But you've seen me only with savages and simple men. When Langlade returns, you'll see the difference. However, that doesn't answer me. Twice you've told me I was different from the men you know. How?'

She still shook her head. 'Wait till I see how you wear; but tell me —' her mood changed — 'you've had no supper. I saved some.'

I bent to her hand. 'You're the thoughtfullest lady alive. But I ate in the canoe. I carried my bag of meat and meal.'

She pursed her lips. 'And you say you're no voyageur! The sheep-faced Coutrol — why, he's been years out of France, and hasn't yet learned to eat on the march. You went to the island. Did you find anything?'

'Nothing.'

'No more fires?'

'No. Have you spoken of it here?'

She shook her head vigorously. 'It was your matter. I don't interfere.'

I motioned to the steps, and begged the girl to sit beside me. Amaiou had left us, the stars were brilliant, the night soft and still. There was chatter in the room behind us, but with the dark and the slipping river we seemed much alone. This girl was keen, and might be knotting her hair into bowstrings for my undoing, but she had great charm. I was annoyed when I heard my name called, and steps approaching.

The steps were heavy and stumbled at the threshold. I looked up at a giant figure in the doorway.

'Is Monsieur Le Claire here?' demanded a voice.

I was on my feet with astonishment. A large, weather-beaten woman, long past middle age, stood there in the fireglow holding a plate. Her shrewd face was seamed and brown, but her eyes were blue, and as to her tongue — I had not supposed there was another accent so like mine outside the United Kingdom. Indeed, hers was worse; never had French speech been more cruelly handled.

She thrust the plate at me. 'For you. From Madame Rupert. She thought you might be hungry.' She turned and was gone, leaving me standing like a yokel.

I stared at the retreating figure, and at the cloth-shrouded plate. 'Who is she? What is she?'

Agatha did not look pleased. 'Madame Rupert's servant,' she said, shortly. 'Her old nurse, I believe.'

'But the woman is not French!'

Agatha yawned. 'No, she's some kind of a foreigner. Are you going to sit down?'

A foreigner! She was straight Devon, by my guess. It came to me that the girl beside me had never heard English spoken.

'But the woman's name?' I demanded.

'Suzanne. Shall we sit here, or go in?'

'Suzanne!' I amended it to 'Susan' in my thought, and sat down in a daze.

The girl looked at the plate, which I still held stiffly as a man holds an infant. 'You might see what she sent.'

I drew the cloth aside. A blue-sprigged plate held four oblong, pale-colored slabs. I passed them to the girl.

She peered. 'What are they?'

I peered also. 'I do not know,' I said. I lied deliberately. No Englishman could ever mistake his national muffins even though they were made of coarse meal. I stared at them. Nothing more square, more concrete, more wholly British, could be devised.

The girl stared too. 'Madame Rupert is kind,' she said softly.

But I said nothing. I looked at the dark, at the forest, at the light in the big house down the river, and at the pale-colored blocks.

'Madame Rupert is the devil,' I whispered under my breath.

CHAPTER IX

MADAME RUPERT'S LAUGHTER

I LAY that night in the open, close to my foundation timbers. I slept little. I had much to ponder, but all my thoughts, like hares in a pathway, ran to one goal; to four oblong muffins on a blue plate. I had eaten the muffins. I had meant not to touch them, but however sinister their message, they were English, and had been mixed by an English hand. I had been months out of England, and had eaten strange foods. I ate the muffins to the last crumb.

Before daybreak next morning I was on the river. Settlement and fort were asleep, but as my canoe slipped by Madame Rupert's cabin, I saw a heavy figure standing by her door. I approved the sight. Whoever the great-footed Suzanne might be, I was assured she was English and so found her industry commendable. Of such sturdy virtues, I thought, was our national character woven, and I moralized happily, the while I paddled. I could never keep self-sufficiency and contentment out of my blood in the early morning.

I reached the island in the river's mouth just as the sun tipped the pine trees. The air was quivering with wakening. The young leaves of the aspens shone like tin, and wavered like oats in the wind. A thrush sang, swelling his throat like a girl's. This tiptoe of expectancy moved me, especially when I

saw that the twig had been pulled from the ground and the paper removed. But no note had been left in turn. Well, I had proved some one was observing me — in secret. I must wait till evening for more.

I rowed back quickly, cried good-morrow to the settlement, and set the men to work on my building. Then I took my bag of personal effects, and went upstream where I was sure of solitude. I wished as impressive a toilette as my resources permitted, and brushed and preened like a mating pigeon. The river was too rapid to use as mirror, else I should have hung over it like any maiden. Yet, after all, it was spirit rather than raiment I was furbishing. I must go to Madame Rupert and prove myself a Frenchman. I must show her I was gay, debonair, a typical Gaul for wit and lightness. I wiped the clogging clay of Devon from my tongue, brushed my graying hair aside, and waxing my mustaches, turned them stiffly upward, and swaggered forth.

There is much in masquerade. As I went with curved instep, and a peacock's tread, my self-confidence rose so that I felt capable of shrugging the black-gowned woman and her muffins into limbo. I whistled and balanced her blue plate on fingers that itched to pitch it into the river. I deeply resented this mystery, and the time it was costing. And in this mood I knocked at her door.

I knocked mightily so that a flock of drakes rose screaming. The door opened at once, yet was not flung wide to the sweet, safe morning, but pushed furtively ajar. The seamed face of Suzanne peered out.

I saluted. 'Is Madame Rupert within?'

She shook her head, but opened the door. 'Come in. Madame is not far. I will call her.'

I stepped inside. The shuttered window to the east was open so that morning looked in, and the little room brimmed with sunshine. I had a feeling of incredible softness and perfume and luxury, but the impression was vague. I saw no detail. Indeed, I saw nothing clearly but the old woman Suzanne.

The night before I had seen only that she was old, wrinkled, and indomitable, but now the daylight showed her as so strange and tragic that curiosity wiped my own interests from my thought. For never had I seen an old face that held such terror, and yet such purpose. Age, as I knew it, commonly brought philosophy, or a kind of calloused fortitude, so the blows of life were met, not perhaps with indifference, but stolidly, without imagination to enhance their pains.

But this servingwoman's face had permanent lines of fear and shrinking cut down into its parchment surface like scars in lava. Her old eyes were terror-filled, with tight squeezed lines as if they feared to open widely. Yet, with it all, there was something impregnable about her. It spoke in her tread, her shoulders, her undaunted voice. My heart went out to her. She had been hardly dealt with, and she was a good warrior. As to her being of my race, her very elbow joints showed her pedigree. Every motion and angularity was British.

I did not talk with her. I was afraid. It seemed if I trusted my voice to speech some mysterious

blood call would sound between us. It was odd how she moved me. I watched in silence while she drew up a chair, shook a cushion in place, and bade me sit. Then she took a small silver whistle which hung by a red silken cord from a nail, and going to the window blew three notes.

'It is a signal,' she explained. 'Madame will come soon.'

Left alone, I used an appraising eye. I was still somewhat awed by the room, though, on cataloguing it, I found little cause for marvel. The furniture — a table, a few chairs, and a divan, were all axe-hewn and unpolished. The effect of luxury, which held me dazed, was created by a colored picture or two tacked to the logs, by a few silver vessels on a shelf, and by heavy blanket cushions scattered on floor and chairs. The table held books, a great branched candelabrum, and a pile of papers. Near the window, a large urn was filled with the pink blossoms of the wild crab-apple, so that the warm air was heavy with scent and yet spicy. I leaned back in the long chair, pressed the cushion at my shoulder blades, and breathed deep of the perfume. Despite my matter-of-fact category the room seemed supernatural. It had a richness that was oriental after the life of the trail. Even the red-corded whistle was at odds with its surroundings. It was a quaint toy of fanciful workmanship. It piqued me, stirred some chord of association.

Madame Rupert came with a swift rush of steps. It should have been a child who flung wide the door after that dance of footfalls.

'Suzanne!' she called. 'Suzanne!' Then she saw me.

She gave a gentle gesture of greeting. 'You? Suzanne whistled, and she is always afraid of Indians. So I ran.'

She spoke pantingly, and could not grow into a woman all at once even with her black gown as aid. A man may run and not lose his years, but let a woman do that forbidden and joyous thing, and she is a child again. That is, if she be slim and young. This woman, I saw now, was both. Her eyes were deep blue from exercise. I stood before her, and murmured courtesies by rote. Then I produced the plate, which, to my vast inconvenience, I had kept in hand.

'A most thoughtful kindness to a hungry man, Madame.'

Her face wrinkled with sudden laughter. 'You liked them?'

'Assuredly, Madame.'

She sat on the divan, and motioned me beside her. I looked at her helplessly, for her unexpected youth and gayety had me at a disadvantage.

'So you liked the muffins?' she pursued. She used the English word 'muffin' and it bumped up in her smooth French speech like a rock in a pool. The sudden mischief in her face seemed somehow its normal mood. But nothing in me rose to meet it. I was more than ever irritated and puzzled, and kept my eyes to the floor.

'The cakes — what was your name for them — are very nice,' I said stiffly. 'I have eaten such in London.'

Her mouth quirked. 'So I supposed. Yes, I was sure you had eaten such in London. Suzanne made them. You have observed Suzanne?'

I bowed. 'Yes, without doubt, I have observed Suzanne.'

'Poor Suzanne!' Her voice purred with an edge of laughter. 'They call her very odd-looking. Tell me, do you find her very odd-looking, Monsieur?'

I straightened; I was tired of studying the floor. I looked at Madame Rupert. There was still spring and youth in her, and something else — a quiver of expectancy.

'Suzanne odd?' I repeated. 'I find her less odd than foreign. If it were not impossible, I should say, Madame Rupert, that your maid was an Englishwoman.' I spoke slowly to let my arrows sink.

She nodded. 'Suzanne is English.' Her face grew serious. 'Yes, Suzanne is English, strange as it seems. Yet more than once the impossible has come true, and English have been found in this wilderness. Tell me —' She waited, and looked at me squarely. 'Tell me, do you speak English, Monsieur?'

We were scarce an arm's stretch apart, our eyes level. Hers looked full in mine, and they burned with eagerness, yes, and, as I said, with expectancy. I felt I was being asked for something — implored. But what? I pulled myself together.

'Do I speak English?' I parroted. 'I speak French better, Madame.'

It was a dolt's speech, though I was proud that my tongue achieved anything. But she was evidently expecting something very different. She

stared, bewildered; then the significance of what I had said took hold of her, and she laughed — a child's laugh, open, unpremeditated. That moment buried my pride in my French. It could have no resurrection. Yet through my anger I felt again that laughter was her natural expression.

I was indeed angry; also defeated. The discourtesy of this open laughter was clear as speech. It said, 'Lay down your hands; the game is over.' I walked to the window and gazed into the forest. Should I turn, and own myself worsted? No, I would admit nothing, ask nothing. I would hold her off as long as possible. That was my doctrine of life, and hopeless as the issue seemed I would keep to my usage.

I stood but a moment at the window, but in that brief time I tasted despair and disappointment. I saw the end of my tether. I had come to nothing, done nothing. I should die unfulfilled. The purpose for which I stood, for which I had given my home and son, was balked by this woman. Yet with her aside, all might be well. For everything else had worked to my hand. I went through revolt and murder.

When I turned I had smoothed my face into order. Madame Rupert was watching. She was not laughing, and her look was anxious and inquiring. It was odd, but she seemed somehow sorry for me. With all my swirling hatred, I could not but see that. I bowed.

'I am going, Madame.'

She looked surprised. 'But you must not go yet. There is a story —'

I interrupted. 'I can hardly hope to furnish you

further diversion. I prefer to go while the memory of my success is yet fresh, Madame.'

'You won't listen? You think my laughter rude?'

'It does not become me to think, Madame.'

She put out her hand. 'Please. There must be an explanation between us.'

I looked at her coldly. She stood between me and my goal. 'I cannot find that the explanation of your laughter interests me,' I said, and bowed again.

The insult brought her color, though she looked less angry than amazed. All youth left her. She straightened her black gown.

'You absolutely refuse to talk this over?'

'I regret to repeat I find further talk useless, Madame.'

'As you wish, then.' She bowed in turn, with her head high, and led me to the door. I would not meet her eyes as I bent to make my adieus. There had best be no truce between us.

I spent the rest of the day in a fury of physical work, for I had no wish for thinking. It seemed that carrying water in a sieve was an intelligent occupation compared to mine. I felt my hours numbered. Yet after all what could the woman say, except to denounce me as English! And that I could deny. She had her wits; I, mine. We should see. In the meantime I would push the thought of her away.

My note to the unknown had said I would be at the island that evening and I went there before dusk. It was a gray night with a streaked sunset, and a threatening wind. I was numb and comfortless, and knew I was probably on a footless errand. I had no surety

that the note had fallen into Monsieur X's hands. It had probably been picked up by a wandering Indian. My muscles ached from the work I had done on my house, and my mind was sore from the strain of the scene of the morning. I was cold.

It was a long waiting, and as I sat, I searched the ground. At last my dull eye was rewarded. Among the gravel lay a three-cornered chunk of red clay such as would cling behind the heel of a boot. I crumbled it and found it moist. It was like the clay that had clung to my own boots; the clay from the Manitou. So much, then, was proved. Some one had come recently to the island straight from that sluggish stream, and he had not worn moccasins.

I waited till the rain began to drip, and the wind called like a wildcat in the trees. No one came.

So I paddled back to the settlement, and was glad of its welcoming light. At the Langlade house was smoke and fire-shine, and the sound of a fiddle. A woman's figure stood in the doorway. But I passed it all, and went to the place I had pitched upon as home. Amaiou was on the bank, watching. He had built a great fire that the gentle rain could not check, and the blaze shone over him. I started. In the leaping red light, with his features blurred, he was not a savage; he was a friend awaiting me. He pulled in the canoe, and pointed to where he had stretched canvas over a section of the unfinished house, making a dry shelter. Also, he had a supper of fish and maize upon the coals. I lay down knowing that of all the marvels I had met, Amaiou's adoption of me was the greatest.

But again dreams, and sad ones. It proved my

nerves taut fiddle-strings that my mind should flounder in make-believe the moment it slipped the restraint of consciousness. But who could sleep well who had staked all on one throw and lost! Yet even in the vagaries of slumber, my course with Madame Rupert seemed to need apology. Again I woke with words in my mouth.

'I ate the muffins,' I was telling her. 'Remember, whatever I said or did, that I did eat the muffins — every crumb.'

CHAPTER X

LANGLADE RETURNS

I WOKE to the drip of rain. My third morning in the settlement with nothing accomplished, and now with bad weather to clog me! I took time to lie and sort my cards.

As I looked them over, I found Madame Rupert the only direct menace. The man with the half face — well, even if it were his fire I had found on the little island, he was a teasing nettle, not a threat. Madame Rupert, on the contrary, might wreck me. She would probably hold her hand till Langlade's return, and I must accomplish what I could before that time.

So the next hour found me ferrying to the Menominee village — the place I should have explored three days earlier had my feet not been caught in women's coils. I climbed the river-bank and walked among the rain-sodden bark tepees. It was a typical Indian village, irregular in plan, and refuse-strewn, but a straggling planting of squash and maize gave it a more than usually permanent air. My coming made little excitement. Children peered, and a few dogs gave tongue, but the day was cold, with a north wind making bullets of the rain, so men and squaws were under cover. I pulled my own tarpaulin closer, and prowled like a wet dog seeking scraps.

Caron rescued me. He stumbled out of his lodge,

rubbing smoke, sleep, and annoyance from his eyes, and would have given me scant welcome had I not dropped the bag I was carrying so that he saw the shine of beads. That brought a hearing and we were soon squatting over his fire taking stock of each other. We reached an agreement. I was to give trinkets and rum in return for his tribal goodwill. A mutually helpful bargain.

He took me to the chief, Che-kau-cho-ka-ma, whom the French called 'Old King.' His square lodge stood in mid-village, and was bark-covered and bound with elm thongs. Although the rain had stopped and the wind was quieting, the chief's old bones were cold, and he was snuffling close to his smoky fire. He had a great frame, and some dignity — in spite of his crouching on all fours — and since the old have always pulled me, I did not have to force myself to courtesy.

I sat with him some hours. I had tobacco to buy the length of my audience, and, though my eyes dripped from the smoke, I felt I was using time well. There was never an old man, Indian or other, who did not like an auditor who bent an attentive ear and then begged for more. I found I understood fairly well, and could mumble what stood for a reply. The study I had given Indian dialects served me better than I had dared hope.

The sun struggled out, and was falling westward when I recrossed the stream. I hunted up the blacksmith and his man, and set them at finishing my house. It seemed they would not work without my supervision. Well, why should they? What could

my money buy that was comparable with idling in this spring weather!

Supper over, I loitered to the Langlades'. 'So you have begun your work,' was Agatha's comment, and I felt she did not mean my building. She had keen eyes and wits. Let her use them. To learn something of the savages, and win their favor, why, that was a road any trader might travel.

That day fixed the pattern of the next and the next. My house was soon finished so I could give time to the Menominee camp. I tried to disguise my interest there, and played with Madame Langlade and chaffered with Agatha when we met. But by day the Langlade women claimed little of me. The baby Catherine liked to put her dolls on my door-stone, but her elders respected a man's working hours. It was Coutrol and Caron who blocked my way. The young lieutenant had ever an eye for me so that I had to play hide-and-seek with him like a mouse in the buttery. And Caron gave me too much attention. He was always at elbow. So I watched for the hour when he gave Madame Rupert her daily lesson, and used it to spread myself unwatched among the Menominee braves.

Madame Rupert I saw daily — yet never. When we met — and since we both used the same path we perforce did meet — I bowed and passed her, with eyes ahead. I would not glance aside to see how this affected her. I had but one formula for her — that I would not advance one inch to meet her accusation; she must bring it to me.

It was easy to avoid her for she did not come to the

Langlades' at night. Yet they saw her by day. 'Madame Rupert has changed since you came,' Agatha said one evening.

'Changed?'

'She's more — she's easier, somehow.' The girl pondered. 'She laughs sometimes.'

'But what have I to do with that?'

'I don't know. But it's since you came. Why, that first day you were here — when we saw her on the shore — she smiled. Do you remember?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know the woman. Have talked to her but twice. I mean nothing to her.'

'Agatha is right,' put in Madame Langlade. It was the old woman who spoke — the Indian. She sat in the corner weaving rushes, and I had forgotten her presence. 'The woman sleeps better since you came,' she went on. 'Her light does not burn all night till the birds stir for waking.'

I could but shrug again. Whenever I touched that woman of the black gown I barked my elbows like a man in the dark. So I ran from the subject. I wanted old Madame Langlade to like me, but was never sure of her. With all her white husband, and her son who passed as white, she was a savage, and I could not read her. It was the women of the settlement I feared; my lips turned awry at the thought.

Yet what made me even more awry was my rôle of friend in the Langlade house. I had not bargained with myself for this. Spy, yes, but household traitor — It was more than I could stomach. Yet how escape? Well, Langlade was due at any time. Coutrol

had told me that tribesmen — Ottawas — had come in, and were waiting Langlade. At his coming I could choose my course — if choice were left me.

Also Coutrol had told me he had seen two new Pawnees: I had been waiting that word. But where was their master? I heard no hint of a mutilated man.

I came down the river-path one day humming guardedly. 'Robin Adair' was singing in my step as it had sung that first night in my slumber. The reason was not far to seek. It was Suzanne's one tune, and she sent it out in a rugged wail whenever the world was well. She never sang the words, but used a non-committal 'la, la.' The tempter pulled me to see more of Suzanne, and I would swing from my path for a glimpse of her. I told myself that when I knew definitely the game was up I would try for speech with her; speak in English, and call her Susan.

This afternoon I walked with a French trip to my heels, a Scotch song on my tongue, and Indian verbs in mind. I was filled with the deep exhilaration a desperate chance breeds. For a week I had kept head and liberty. Sun, wind, and water were gay; the sap of life was strong. It was in keeping that suddenly long hulloos should sound from the river.

I stopped. The pulse of the settlement seemed to catch and hold. Then from every cabin poured French and Indians, they crowded the bank, and gave deep-throated calls.

The hulloos came nearer, and a surge of black dots appeared up-river. My entry had been made under a span of rainbow; this flotilla danced in full sunlight.

The canoes multiplied; it was like watching water-drops in a cascade.

In a moment they were down on us. My eye caught Langlade in the first canoe. Thick-set, heavy-shouldered, he was as marked from his followers as bull-dog from wolf-hound. His Indians were naked, lank-haired, and shining with oil, with stiff, meaningless faces, and glittering eyes. I had never before seen Indian warriors massed. The English commonly spoke of them as lions and tigers. I thought of pythons.

The flotilla drew up by the Langlade cabins, and we pressed forward. I was on the outskirts of the crowd, so could not see Langlade greet his family, but I did get sight of him as he motioned his Indians to disembark. He was glancing around with the keen eye of the homecomer, so it was not strange his attention should light on me. He was a burly man, but quick-moving, and he pushed toward me through the crowd before I realized I had been seen. I had thought to be brought to him with ceremony. But here, within two minutes of landing he was asking my name.

I named myself with a phrase or two. 'I have been waiting you a week, Sieur de Langlade. May I present my credentials?'

He answered civilly enough, but took time to look me over. With the Indians and settlers as witness he gave himself to my case. I handed him the papers which I carried in my pouch, but I stood silent. His open suspicion steeled me, and my self-possession grew. This man to man examination I had met in

many situations, and knew my weapons. So I waited the verdict with nonchalance that was not all bravado. But while the balance swung, Agatha Bourassa pushed forward.

'Charles!' she expostulated. 'Look at Charlotte.'

The interruption was rudely sudden, but Langlade was not angered. He clicked his tongue, as if to put a period to his thought, and his face softened.

'Where?' he asked. 'But I told her to go home,' he added, and his voice was dragging.

Agatha pointed. Madame Langlade was but a few paces away, and we had been blind not to see her. She was staring at the rows of waiting Indians and she clung, sobbing, to the shoulder of her mother-in-law, her face shapeless with fright, with open mouth and relaxed muscles.

Langlade turned to me. 'Wait!' he ordered. Then he went to his wife and covered her face with his hand. 'There, there,' he murmured with a sort of weary gentleness. 'They won't hurt you. Go back to the house.' He faced her toward the woods and the cabin. 'Go straight home,' he admonished. 'I'll follow soon.'

I stared. 'It's the Indians,' Agatha explained at my shoulder. 'She is so afraid of strange Indians she goes out of her mind. She can't help it,' she added, frowning. 'Oh, see Madame Rupert.'

I looked — as did Langlade. The woman was coming down the river-bank, and the crowd parted as for a personage. She was in white, a straight full gown, cut like her black one, on the lines of a priest's robe. She walked swiftly, her eyes keen only for the

Indians and Langlade, yet the whole thing was theatrically unreal. For one thing, white is startling in the wilderness.

Langlade went to her, his hat low in hand. His knee bent as he kissed the fingers she gave him. I could not hear their talk, but there was homage on his part, and a glowing interest on hers, that removed the scene from the woods and cabins and carried it to courts. I saw her examine the lines of Indians, then nod at Langlade with exultation. I stared woodenly. Agatha had turned away and I waited alone. My Indian, Amaiou, crowded at my elbow.

Five minutes or more passed before Langlade again thought of me. He glanced at my credentials, said a word to Madame Rupert, then crooked a finger for me to approach.

'Who are you?' he said without prelude.

I pointed to my papers. 'I have nothing more to add.'

'You are Auguste Le Claire of Rouen, and have a license to trade?'

I bowed.

'Then why present forged papers?'

I was once more as angry as if I had been an honest man. Blood flooded my face, and I gripped my sword. 'Sieur de Langlade, you take liberties,' I began chokingly.

But Agatha Bourassa pushed in front of me. 'Wait, Charles!' Say nothing you'll be sorry for.' She spread her hands between us. 'This man saved baby's life. He did, indeed. Let Charlotte tell you.'

Langlade shook his head. 'Stand aside, Agatha. One thing at a time. This is not personal. A rogue is a rogue.' He whipped open my paper. 'The signature of the Intendant at Montreal?' he asked with pointing finger.

I bowed.

'Dated January last?'

I bowed again.

He chuckled. 'In January the Intendant was in bed in Quebec. You should lay your nets better.'

Now who could have foreseen a thing like that! That a half-breed in this wilderness should know what was happening in the Intendant's household in Montreal! Yet he knew — there was no mistaking that. I was dumb — overpowered by disdain of myself. I had planned with such care in small matters, and let an obvious thing like this slip by. I stood helpless; long enough for Amaiou crouching at my side to lay hand on his knife.

My silence, or the sneer on my face which was for myself, seemed to arrest Langlade. 'As to what you may have done for my child, we will come to that later,' he said more temperately. 'But honesty is honesty. What have you to say?'

I shook my head. 'How should I know what clerks the Intendant employs?'

'Exactly.' It was Madame Rupert who spoke. She had been looking away. Now she wheeled and stepped to me. 'What is this, Sieur de Langlade? I heard but little. Is it that you doubt my kinsman's story?'

'Your kinsman!' Langlade stepped backward.

I stood still, but I laughed. A dry, discordant cackle not my own.

'Certainly my kinsman,' she repeated, and though something crazed and rebellious urged me to resist her aid so that I had ado to keep from pushing her away and ending the madness, yet I could not but recognize the fine candor of her face.

Langlade looked bewildered, and somewhat sulky. 'Your kinsman,' he chanted. 'What does he here?'

She swept me a look of friendliness. 'I think Monsieur Le Claire only desires to tell you his business, Sieur de Langlade. Have you given him opportunity?'

He took the rebuke like a school-boy. He had lost his leadership. Yet he clung to my papers. 'Then why is this date wrong?'

She gave a pouf of impatience and motioned me to silence. 'Sieur de Langlade,' her voice was cold, 'I am not here to plead Monsieur's cause, nor to unravel, as he himself suggests, the mistakes of the Intendant's clerk. I wish only to have you understand that I know about this gentleman — have known of him since childhood. If that does not satisfy you he is in your hands.'

Langlade's tongue clicked. 'Enough.' He looked unconvinced, baffled. 'I will see you to-morrow, Le Claire,' he said turning away.

The woman went with him, but she smiled back at me. She was an actress and a liar — and looked nobility itself. She had saved my life. But why, why, why?

I watched the two. Langlade was directing his Indians and she stood beside him. The little half-breed boy, Nicholas, was clinging to her hand.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST OF MADAME RUPERT

So I was free — yet tied. I had been saved by a miracle, and found the supernatural left me breathless — and a trifle irritable. It seemed I desired straight encounters even where my safety was concerned. I wanted things over — disposed of. Yet I was well pleased that my strange rescuer was talking with Langlade so I could not go to her at once. I wanted time with myself before I met her.

So I signed Amaiou away, and avoiding the open paths, dipped into the woods, and pushed toward the Manitou. As I walked, I saw footprints; small moccasin tracks. This, I remembered, was Madame Rupert's haunt, so I followed. If she had left Langlade, if Fate offered me this encounter, well, I would take it.

But it was Agatha I met. The girl was sitting on a bed of pine-needles, her head bent, her arms wrapped round her drawn-up knees. It was an attitude of contemplation I had not seen in her before. It was foreign — yet winning. I bounded to her before my reason had time to check my heels.

'Thank you, Agatha,' I cried, and bent to her hand.

But she looked at me with dull eyes. 'I like men straight,' she rejoined.

'You mean I'm not? Do you take a clerk's error so seriously?'

She picked at the pine-needles. 'It isn't that. What do I care about your papers?'

I took time to find a seat in the moss beside her. 'Why are you sitting here?' I countered.

She met me flatly. 'I was wondering whether I was right to stand between you and Charles.'

That hurt somehow. 'It was a great kindness,' I mumbled.

She scowled over her clasped hands. 'Why did you lie?' she demanded.

Now from a woman, one can let that accusation pass. So I kept my voice even. 'That is what your brother-in-law asked,' I reminded her. 'I'm sorry if it is a family salutation. I find it insulting.'

That brought her color, but she stood her ground. 'The truth is not insulting,' she said sturdily. 'And it is true you lied about Madame Rupert. You said you did not know her.'

And now it was my turn to pick at the pine-needles with no words in me. I was tempted — tempted to tell this girl, who had befriended me, the truth about Madame Rupert and myself; to throw my bewilderment and suspicion to her for solution. But I resisted. Since it was Madame Rupert's caprice to save my life I would await her disposal of me. But I was acutely conscious of the woman before me, of the fine free line of her body, the sweep of her hair, her strength and straightforwardness. That I should be acting a part before her filled me with sick distaste.

I did not answer her accusation directly. 'I can explain about Madame Rupert,' I said at length.

'But not now. For a time you must take me on faith. Will you do that?'

She rose and brushed at her dress. With her change of pose her mood altered. 'Take you! Why should I take you on faith or other?' she mocked. Her eyes were bright again; hard and sparkling. 'You are only a stranger; a passer-by. What do I care who is your kinswoman! Keep your secrets!' And flicking me off between thumb and finger she gave a laugh and a nod, and was gone.

I had ado not to follow. I knew her sudden hardness was but mask — what did it cover! I dreaded to lose her liking. She was a Frenchwoman, I, an English spy. Yet there was something between us; a comradeship, an understanding. Well, I must let her go. I clenched my hands in the pine-needles, and taught myself discipline.

I sat there till dusk. With the end near, I let myself go over the past. I thought long of my boy, bringing myself to justice for leaving him young and orphaned. But I only ran once more over the old circle, and came to the same answer.

A man owes care and nurture to his child. But also he owes nurture to his own growth, and to the perception of life that is his. And if, through the years, his life grow to have but one meaning, if the debt he owes his world takes but one shape, then he must let his convictions work through him. I thought yearningly of my boy, yet even as I dwelt on the remembered grasp of his fingers, and the pipe of his young voice, I knew he was in safer hands than mine. The relationships of family are often for-

tuitous; accidents of the flesh. I loved my boy, but he was of my blood, never of my spirit. He would be a safer man than I; more normal; more wonted to the level highway. I was leaving him money — perhaps too much. But he was with people of caution who were his kin and loved him.

And then I let myself go to my main purpose. How mad it had been — yet how possible. I was to fail; yet success was at my shoulder. Mr. Pitt had called me 'hare-brained,' and I had let the word go by, yet I had been as cool in this as in business, and had stood an equal chance of a successful game.

Not that it had been a game. No. To save this country, this wealth, for my people — to furnish an outlet in these fertile acres for the sodden starving folk of my land — this had possessed me for years. And it was possible. The French did not own this new empire; the real masters were the Indians, whose friendship had been cajoled. And that friendship — or favor — was for sale to the highest bidder. If any one who could handle men could get on the ground, sound the temper of the chiefs, and make fairer promises than the French — Why? the game was his in turn.

And this I had done. Disaffection is easily sown with simple people, and I had scattered much seed among the Menominees. More, I could back my promise. I had pack-trains of guns and trinkets to produce upon demand; my men were in Boston waiting my word. For my hope was the trader. I had not spoken of trading to Mr. Pitt, for his was the warrior's mind that thinks in terms of fighting men. But to barter rather than fight was my ambition.

Well, I was caught in a trap, and was but one more fanatic to be swept aside for saner men.

The dark was muffling me, so I rose, brushed my clothing, and washed in the stream. I must see Madame Rupert. On my former visit to her, I had tricked myself out like a cock in spring. Now I went careless of myself.

Light flecked through Madame Rupert's shutters, and Suzanne unbarred to my knock. She said her mistress was within, and opened the door widely. I remembered her fear of Indians, and knew she must be disturbed by those who had come in that day, so I halted, telling her how quiet it was outside, and how the frogs were croaking. Then I went to my rescuer.

She sat by her table close to the candlelight. It was the first tallow candle I had seen in months, and I had time to think dully that she had come West with a heavy cargo. She had been studying or writing, for a litter of papers lay at her side.

She rose. She would have held out her hand, I think, but I forestalled her by the distance at which I made my bow.

'Madame, I am deeply grateful. Whatever the explanation of your defense of me, I am sure your motive was compassionate. But I cannot accept.'

She stood silent, looking at me. She was still wearing the white robe, which I saw now was made of sail cloth, and her slight figure in the candlelight looked young and unguarded.

'You think I did not tell the truth,' she said at last.

I bowed again. 'Truth is never a fixed quantity. But you are not my kinswoman.'

'And I say I am.'

I put out my hand. 'This is a fantastic mistake!' I protested.

'There is no mistake.'

My patience snapped. 'Madame, there is. I cannot take shelter where I have no right.'

'You refuse help from me?'

I came nearer. 'Madame, see! If this is not a whim on your part, it is a misunderstanding. Helping me would involve you. I must not let you take the risk.'

She held to the table, her face white. 'You refuse help from me,' she made a forlorn effort to smile, 'yet you paid for the dress I am wearing. Your money bought that candle there.'

I went to her with my knees shaking. She was mad, of course, but her look left me unstrung. 'Who are you?' I managed with my throat dry. 'Who do you think I am?'

She stepped back. 'You are John Sargent,' she said by rote. 'You live at Kenmere, in Sussex, and your office is on the Strand, London.'

I shook my head. It is pitiful how wits desert under a crisis. 'I don't know you. I never saw you before,' was all I could say.

'No,' she looked at me, and suddenly pushed a chair forward. 'Won't you sit? No, you never saw me, but I was brought up to know you.'

I clenched my fingers on the chair she offered. I searched her from the curls of her light hair to her

moccasined feet, but no line of her helped me. 'Who are you?'

'You cannot think?'

'No.' Our voices whispered and wavered. The candle flared.

'Then I must tell you. I've something to give you. Something I before refused. Wait.'

She went to the table, and taking a small object from a covered box, pressed it in my palm. 'Take it. When I refused before, I — I thought you unworthy. But I have learned not to judge.'

I opened my hand. I held a ring; my family ring; the ring I had asked my solicitor to find at any cost.

I dropped in the chair. For a long moment I did not think of the woman; I was alone with my past. The ring my father had given me as pledge of a tradition I must keep! My wife had taken it from me — and given it away. It stood for my youth and ideals, it had been a symbol of the grief and disenchantment of my manhood; it came to me now, in this last chapter, as a summing-up of the arid disappointment my life had been.

But now I knew the woman, though it was true I had never seen her till I came here.

I raised my head. She was also sitting, and had turned away not to spy, so that I had to call her attention.

'So, you are Hortense Le Claire.'

'Yes.'

I stormed over to her. 'Why are you here?'

She faced me. Her look was so stricken it froze

my speech. I went on my knees to her. 'Never mind!' I cried.

She moved her head woodenly. 'I must mind. But not to-night. Don't ask me questions to-night.'

'I won't. I promise.' I felt a sick panic of wishing to spare. I came to my feet slowly, looking down at her small huddled figure. 'So you are Helen's little sister — you are Hortense Le Claire! In the name of — all we have in common — thank you for your help.'

'Don't!' she exclaimed. 'Don't be grateful. This is only beginning. You'll hate me before the end.' Her face, still upturned, was incredibly pinched, so that she looked old, almost wizened. 'Sit a few minutes, please?' she said more quietly. 'Wait.'

I went over to the chair and waited. I sat with ghosts. Hortense was, as I have said, a half-sister of my wife; born in Paris. I had met and married Helen when she was with relatives in England, and I had never known her family in France. I looked over at the lax, white figure. When she had been Madame Rupert she had seemed mature; now, as Hortense Le Claire, I saw her as a child — my wife's baby sister. Thin veined hands, and tiny feet! She was a baby still.

She drew herself up, and smoothed her hair. 'Shall we talk?'

I could think of but one remark that would not be prying. 'How did you know me?'

'I didn't at first. The name caught me — you remember I fainted. I was so lonely, and so far from

home, and the name — Then when I looked closely — well, you are somewhat like your portrait.'

'What portrait?'

'You don't remember? Helen had it painted, and sent home just after you were married.'

'Tell me, did Helen give you the ring?'

'Yes, but —'

I rose to brush the subject away. 'Never mind,' I interrupted. 'And Suzanne?'

'My old nurse — mother's nurse.' She spoke more naturally. 'Mother brought her from England. She was Helen's nurse, too.'

'Does she know who I am?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know. She knows the picture, but you have changed.'

Silence fell again. It lasted till the candle guttered. She turned at the sound. 'What do you know about me?' she asked, and even in the dimming light I could see she was trembling.

I crossed to her and again knelt by the low chair. 'Hortense,' I said in English, 'I find you with a married name, and yet alone. That, in itself, means sorrow. Tell me as much as you like, when you like, but remember you are indeed my kinswoman, and stand in my guard as Helen would have done.'

She shook her head. 'No,' she returned gravely. 'We are not kin; that is the sorrow that must come. But not to-night. What did you last hear of me?'

I thought quickly. 'You married — you married — you married Lieutenant de Godefroy,' the name came by magic, 'and then went to Montreal.'

She drew herself up. 'Yes, I married Lieutenant

Godefroy,' she repeated dully, 'and then I went to Montreal. And then —' But she could get no further. Her lips trembled so she could not shape words, and she gave a hurt call so that Suzanne came running. She took the woman's arm and drew herself to her feet. 'You see I cannot tell you,' she said, and she kept herself well in hand for though our last sentences had been in English, she changed to French now that Suzanne could hear.

'Go to Sieur de Langlade to-morrow,' she went on more calmly. 'Ask him. I shall send him word to tell all he knows. And now good-night, and please go.'

I kissed her hand; the small tanned hand with the veined wrist that belonged to the baby Hortense that was my kinswoman, and I went as swiftly as she wished. But at the door I turned back to Suzanne.

'If your mistress needs help come to me at once,' I said, and I put my hand on her thin old arm.

The shrewd, terrified face twitched. 'Do I know you?' she whispered, and her look moved me so that I could only shake my head, and run out of the door.

Outside, the night was still and friendly. The fires of the Menominees glowed across the river, and nearer the fort were new clusters of lights where the Indians who had come in that day were in camp. I noticed that Langlade kept running water between his home and his savages, and remembered his wife's unreasoning terror. Indeed my dulled mind was so weary of sensation that it thought only of irrelevant

things as I walked to my cabin fingering the recovered ring in my pouch.

As I crossed my threshold, I saw Amaiou's shadow. He had been sitting waiting in the dark, and now was retreating to the little lean-to in the rear.

I called sharply so that he came forward. Hitherto I had spoken to him always in halting Algonquin. Now I went on in French. 'Come! why do you pretend not to understand French, and why did you take out your knife this afternoon?' I used my flint as I spoke and, touching a pitch-pine splinter, flared the light in his eyes. He blinked, and stepped back. Yet the surprise was mine; for the sudden light distended his eyes, throwing them into relief. Large, round, blue, they were candid as an English ploughboy's. They seemed almost disembodied — a vision. It was absurd the shock they gave. I had to lift the light higher, and get a view of the man's blanketed brown shoulders, before I could call realities to mind.

He shrugged and slouched away. At the door he stopped and spoke in Algonquin. 'The crow can speak many tongues, so he talks too much and too loud, and is shot by the hunter. The eagle uses but one speech.' Then he pulled his blanket over his head, and went out.

I sat on the edge of my pallet, head in hands. So Hortense Le Claire was here in camp with me! What would it mean to my plans? I had been too dumb with wonder and pity to think of that before. And why was she here! I was ablaze with curiosity and dread.

I took out the ring, and lit another splinter that I

might see it clearly. Inside the circle the old motto was cut small and deep — 'Man shall not live by bread alone.' The words mumbled themselves to me, and they both mocked and comforted. For those words I had broken my family life; for them I had come to the wilderness. I closed my fingers on the ring until it cut.

It was daybreak when exhaustion sent me to sleep. And it was only after many hours that it came to me that Hortense had asked nothing about myself; that she had expressed no surprise at my presence, nor curiosity as to my errand.

CHAPTER XII

LANGLADE TALKS

I WAITED morning with anxiety, but it came dourly; gray with drizzling rain. It had turned cold, the grass was heavy and sodden, the poplars showed the whites of their leaves. I was depressed by the weather for my nerves were out of hand. I could neither think nor plan till I had seen Langlade, and found what he knew about Hortense. Never before had I met an absolute impasse. This palsied me. Till I met Langlade I was useless. I marveled at my quiet of the night before, and wished I had asked questions. Also I was troubled that I had found wet red clay on my door-stone. Was I being spied on again?

I ploughed through the wet to Langlade's cabin, but was told he was at the warehouse. I heard the chatter of women within, but refused to enter. The settlement was very quiet. Across the river the Indians who had arrived the day before were huddled round their fires.

In the warehouse Langlade stood among his fur bales. He had two clerks with him, and was marking and checking. His slouch, as he bent over his work, was more savage than French. Yet his shoulders were broad, and his chin firm. As I came forward, he made the clicking sound with his tongue that I learned meant that he dismissed one thing to take on another.

I went to the heart of the matter. 'You have heard from Madame Rupert?' He nodded, and, turning, sent the clerks away. Then he walked to the open door of the warehouse, where it jutted over the river, and looked up and down. No one was in sight, and he seated himself on a bale of skins, signing me to do the same.

'What do you want to know?' he began.

Even now I can see the long room, and smell the fetid drying hides. Langlade looked more Indian than ever, humped on the skins, pipe in hand.

'All you know about Madame Rupert,' I said rather shortly. For a moment I was the dominant race; the man before me, a savage.

He put tinder to his pipe. 'Yet you are her kinsman?' he parried.

I knew I was a fool in my manner of approach, so took myself in hand and told him the truth. 'Sieur de Langlade, I am indeed kin to the woman you call Madame Rupert, but I had never met her and did not know her by that name. Our families have been separated, and I know only that she married Lieutenant de Godefroy and went to Montreal. From that to this, is a blank. Why she is here, what of her husband, why she is called by a strange name — I do not know.'

He handled his freshly lighted pipe and considered. He was as reticent as I was in haste. 'You did not expect to find her here?'

'No.' It was curious to be telling exactly the truth.

'And you know nothing about her husband?'

'No.'

'Then why not ask her?'

'I did. She preferred you to tell me.'

That won him somewhat. He puffed at his pipe. 'She was right to leave it to me,' he said, complacently. 'I gave orders that no one here should talk about her story.'

I held hard on my patience. 'Your orders have been obeyed,' I assured him. 'No one would tell me anything.'

He nodded. 'Of course,' and went on smoking.

The water dripped, and the wind whined in the reeds. I saw Langlade was Indian enough so that I could not hurry him. I took my own pipe. Langlade finished a pipe bowl before he spoke. Then he looked over at me rather benignantly. 'Yes, they were married and came to Montreal,' he began. 'That was last year. Then from Montreal Godefroy was ordered out here to this fort.' He stopped. 'You knew Godefroy?'

'No.'

'Did you ever see him?'

'No.'

'I see. Well, he had been in Canada before — at Mackinac. He was stationed at Mackinac four years ago.'

'Yes?'

Langlade fussed with his pipe. 'He married,' he said. 'Married the Ottawa girl, Ahnawa. He married her hard and fast with a priest.'

I got up. 'Married!'

Langlade nodded. 'He was a fool. But the girl was a relative of mine. And then he went back to France.'

'But he married — he married Hortense!'

Langlade shrugged. 'No one in France knew of the marriage in Mackinac. And he never expected to see Canada again. It was the devil's own luck he should have been sent back.' He shrugged again. 'And to have to come here to La Baye where the girl was staying with her mother!'

'And he brought Hortense here?'

Langlade shook his head. 'What could he do? He was under orders. Then he did not bring — your relative. He left her in Montreal.'

'But she is here!'

Langlade straightened. 'She is not like other women. She followed. She found a priest and convoy, and went with them to Mackinac. Then she came down here. Godefroy didn't know.'

'That Indian marriage,' I burst in, 'is it legal?'

'I told you it was in the chapel — with a priest.'

'I see,' I said. I went over to the door and sat down. Nausea was overpowering me, and the stench from the hides seemed part of the story.

I came back to stand over him. 'So she came here and you told her about the marriage,' I stormed.

He was slow in replying. 'What else could we do! Of course she was not his wife. And then there was the child Nicholas.'

Of course there was the child Nicholas; I could feel his hand in mine. And of course Hortense was not a wife! That this indignity should come to a woman of my family! I must kill Godefroy.

'What did she do?' I asked stupidly.

Langlade rose. 'Enough,' he said. 'We are too long coming to the point. We bark like puppies. There

was nothing for her to do. She never saw Godefroy again — that is, never but once and for a moment. When the boats came in, and he heard she was here — well, he came down to the shore, and he looked at her. He stood still and looked, and she started to run to him — then he turned and went away.'

'He went away? Where?'

'How do I know?' said Langlade impatiently. With the sharpened observation that comes with stress, I saw he, too, was pale. 'He went into the woods somewhere. He killed himself.'

'He is dead then!' I felt less choked. 'He is dead — out of the way. But why — why is she still here?'

Langlade straightened as he had before. 'She is not like other women,' he repeated. 'One must get new measures to understand her. And where should she go? She is not maiden; not wife, nor widow.' There was respect in his tone.

'But why call herself Madame Rupert!'

'She had to have some name. I gave her that one. And every one uses it. It is my law.'

We sat silent after this, and Langlade smoked. I am a slow-thinking man, and must have my material in shape to know where I stand. And Langlade had the air of a man resting in his own thoughts after a time in the field.

For myself, I could not keep away from Godefroy. Hate of him filled me; he had fouled my family. I could not endure he should be dead and out of my hands. I had to ask where he was buried.

'Buried?' Langlade jerked himself back to realities.

He snapped his fingers. 'Who knows? The wolves attended to that.'

'You mean?'

'We never saw him again. He went out in the woods and shot himself.'

I seized at the straw. 'Then he may be living. If you never saw him again how can you know?'

I was white enough with hate for Langlade to respect my mood, and he answered painstakingly. 'Godefroy had an Indian slave — my mother has him now — and he followed. The slave says Godefroy walked a day without stopping, and he would not speak, or eat, or drink. He just kept walking, and at last he talked to himself. At the end of the day he took his gun and shot himself.'

It was a nauseating picture, but I had to have details. 'What did the slave do then?'

'He came back,' said Langlade. He felt my blood lust, and was patient. 'He ran back here at once.' He clicked his tongue. 'What did you say was your name?' he reopened.

I almost said Sargent. 'Le Claire,' I murmured, and wondered automatically how Langlade could forget a name that had proved so surprising. But I knew now why Hortense had fainted, and as to the man in the forest —

I have always marveled that the truth came to me so quickly, all at once; with all the testimony.

'Godefroy — what did he look like?' I leaped at Langlade. He was talking at the moment, but my voice bore his down. And again he respected the madness in me.

'Godefroy?' he frowned. 'Tall, yes, and handsome — fair.' He softened. 'He was a fool, but there was no one like him.'

'How was there no one like him?'

'He was no common man,' said Langlade soberly. 'Take him in the woods. There are few Indians as good woodsmen as he, and no Frenchman could approach him. He could kill a bird with a throw of the knife. He knew how to shift for himself, he knew — Well, if he had not been white — and not been a fool —' He stopped, and sighed.

I had a moment to catch myself. I must not tell Langlade; must not let him know till I had opportunity for my own ends, that I was sure the man he mourned was alive. But I risked one more question. I asked it flatly.

'Did the slave say where Godefroy shot himself?'

Langlade made a wry face. 'In his head,' he answered shortly.

Well, I was answered. I tried to walk away, but Langlade held me with questions about business. I answered by rote, for I could prate of trade and licenses in my sleep. And then he let me go.

CHAPTER XIII

I TALK AND DISCOVER LITTLE

I WENT out to kill Godefroy. I went as single-minded as a hound on a scent. Godefroy haunted the Manitou, and I could find him. I had no idea of a duel. I intended to kill him.

It was not coincidence that before I had gone twenty feet I met the little Nicholas. Since I petted the child he was always at heel. He came snuggling out like a wet puppy, all waggles and smiles, but I found it hard to take his hand. I was in an animal mood, and saw nothing but hate.

But he was not a child to be ignored. Looking at him with sharpened senses I had to admit he had beauty, and was strong and keen. He was prattling of his bow. He could outshoot any of the boys in the Menominee camp, he boasted.

I could not let him talk; I remembered from whom he inherited his woodcraft. 'Where is Madame Rupert?' I interrupted.

He stopped dancing. 'She's in her cabin.' He snuggled so close he tangled in my legs. 'Are you afraid of her?' he whispered.

This arrested me. For I had often seen the child clinging to Madame Rupert. 'No, I am not afraid.'

He danced again. 'I'm not, either.' He wagged his

head vauntingly. 'I like her. But my mother is afraid.'

'How do you know?'

The boy's voice sunk. 'She won't let me go there. She says Madame Rupert makes bad medicine, and I mustn't talk to her.'

This troubled me.

'What else does she say?' I lagged to prolong the talk.

Nicholas whispered again. 'She says Madame Rupert talks to devils; they will carry her off some day. Some morning she won't be there at all.'

'Where will she be?' I asked sharply.

The boy crossed himself. 'Gone to hell, my mother says,' he quavered. 'Are you afraid? Do you want to see my medicine?'

I nodded, and he pulled at the thong around his neck, bringing out a small pouch of embroidered deerskin. From that he took a metal button — a button from an officer's coat.

'It is a fine medicine,' he said proudly. 'No other boy has one like it. My father used to wear it.'

I sent him away at that — I could not stand talk of his father — and I went to my cabin.

I went to my cabin for my gun, and I took it and examined the priming. It was in good condition. Also my knife was keen. I was prepared.

But I did not start at once. When I left Langlade, I had but one idea. Now others came. For one thing, before I risked my life with Godefroy I must see Hortense. Yes, distasteful and difficult as it was, I must see her.

But why had Godefroy gone through a legal ceremony with the Ottawa girl! Why had he not done as other men!

I met Amaiou in the lean-to. 'You are sick,' he said in Algonquin. 'Your face is like an old man's. Drink some rum.'

I took out my flask and gave him a drink as well. 'We pledge our brotherhood. Amaiou, you have the cunning of the weasel. I have the foot of a buffalo. Will you do some work I cannot?'

He opened his round blue eyes — the eyes that always disconcerted and puzzled. 'My brother's bread is mine,' he said, and came to stand beside me. 'The same sun rises for us and goes down at night. Our days end together. What work has my brother?'

I was puzzled. His look was lifted, more impassioned than my question justified. What I would ask of him was not worth this rhetoric.

'The man who followed us,' I explained hurriedly. 'The man with his face shot away. I think he hides on the Manitou. Can you find where and tell me? Do nothing to him. Just find his camp.'

Amaiou was disconcerted; so obviously disappointed that I speculated on what he had expected me to say. He took refuge in his blanket, and when he did answer his tone lost dignity. He contended the point; argued that the man was not hanging around the settlement or he would have been seen. I had met this in Amaiou before — this disposition to argue. I suspected that with a common ground of a fluent language I would find great candor in him.

I reminded him now that he was the only Indian,

except squaws and slaves, on the settlement side of the river, and that white men never strayed a rifle shot from their roofs unless hunting. So, since the Manitou was too near for game and too sluggish for fishing, nothing would call a white man that way, and a man could hide there with impunity. To which he agreed without interest. I told him we would meet at nightfall, and that he should report then.

This done, there was nothing I could invent to postpone my going to Hortense. The situation must be met.

Outside, the rain had stopped, and scuds of cloud were flying before a high southwest wind, leaving clear patches of pale blue sky. It was still cold. Smoke was pouring from Madame Rupert's chimney, and it formed elfin figures as it drifted away.

When Suzanne's puckered eye appeared at the crack, I motioned her outside, and held her a moment in the flapping wind.

'Never let the Indian woman Ahnawa inside the door,' I cautioned.

She nodded. The wind whipped her gray hair across her face, and the smoke whirled around her in witch coils. She looked me over cannily. Suddenly her face wrinkled in a smile. 'My mistress is baking muffins,' she said, and ducked into the house.

I followed. Hortense was standing over her fireplace watching cakes cooking in an open skillet over the coals. Her chimney was the best in the settlement, built on good lines and well chinked. The fire was drawing well, and the coals glowed deep and warm. The room was ruddy, and full of the fragrance

of toasting meal, and the bending woman, her cheeks rosy from the blaze, was suddenly at one with her background. This was no alien priestess, or forsaken child. This was a woman of the wilderness in her home.

It was a moment's picture. Then she turned, and the color left her face. 'You have seen Langlade?'

Then it all came back. I took her hands, and pulled her to the window. 'Hortense,' I cried lamely. 'It's a fair world, and you are young. Everything passes. The salt will come back to life. Indeed it will. If one keeps health and self-respect, there's bound to be something in just living. There's bound to be. And you've kept your self-respect. That's all that counts. Believe me.'

She moved away to face me. Her face was as calm as mine was turbulent.

'I have lived with — what happened — many months,' she reminded me. 'So I've learned. One must keep quiet and work it out. Yes, one must learn to keep quiet. But you —' She looked me over, and I knew I looked ragged and drawn. 'I don't think you've eaten. I was cooking muffins for you. Sit here and eat them now.'

I blessed her good sense in keeping our tongues away from tragedy, and I let her serve me. I ate like a dazed and hungry man — yes, and a grateful one. And, as before, I ate the muffins to the last crumb.

And out of all the welter of horror I found myself looking up at her with a smile. 'The first muffins — were they a threat or an invitation?'

And she smiled too. A little elf pucker, that hid in

mouth corners. 'It was a whim,' she parried. And I remembered again how young she was, and how Helen had always spoken of her as a dimpled mischief. And with that, the tragedy of the situation swept back.

'Hortense,' I cried. 'You must get out of this at once — at once.'

She sat on a folded buffalo skin at the edge of the fire, her back against the wall. Sitting in a cross-legged heap, her straight black gown was as little imposing as a child's rumpled pinafore.

'How English you are — even the best of you,' she said. 'Woman, go here — woman, go there! Suppose you tell me why you are here.'

The fire shone through her light curls, throwing gay shadows on her face, and making her question seem a child's. I must hold her whims in leash, and get her back to France.

'Oh, I —? Adventure. An eye for trade. Though I find trading a farce, for the French hold the land too well. But the question now, is how to get you to Montreal. Perhaps Agatha Bourassa would go with you; we could get men and canoes. It happens — well, I've funds available.'

She rose. 'You always have funds available,' she said slowly. 'Since money long since ceased to be an aim with you, John Sargent, don't ask me to believe you came here to trade. As for myself — you are kind, and I'm grateful. But I shall not go back to France.'

I looked at her stupidly. Standing with her black gown hanging straight from her shoulders, she was

again Madame Rupert — the woman who had baffled and trapped me. She gave me back my self-possession and also my realization that I balanced on a hair rope. Yet, for the moment I was careless of whether she believed my story. I must dispose of her first.

'What can you do here?' I knew my tone was hostile.

She looked as though my sudden tempers did not touch her. 'What can I do here?' she repeated gravely. 'What can I do there? Remember — I am neither maid nor widow. What would I be in France?'

That could not but sober me. 'But here, Hortense! Why here?'

She paced the room. 'Langlade is a great man. If he works out his plans he — he is a great leader.'

I let her pace a moment. 'I wait to see how his leadership concerns you,' I said coldly.

She kept her composure. 'It does. It gives me opportunity for service. Sieur de Langlade has had little education, but he has a methodical mind. He wishes records of his Indians — his marches — his speeches. I can do that.'

'You stay here to be Langlade's secretary — his clerk!'

She turned. 'I stay here —' she began gently. Then her voice broke. 'You said yourself the salt would come back to life. Is there any better way to get hold of life than by service?'

I took her hands and bent to them. 'Hortense, I'm brutal. I don't mean to be. Be patient. But you

must not stay here alone. Remember I have rights. You are of my blood.'

She shook her head — though she let her hands rest in mine. 'No, no, not of your blood! Your wife's sister, John, and aunt of your boy, but never of your blood. I am a Frenchwoman. We are miles apart.'

'Your mother was English.'

'I am my father's child. Then, too, my mother was wife of her husband. She spent the last half of her life trying to forget England.'

I let her hands go. She was right. Her mother's first marriage had been a drab affair; dutiful, dull. She had found her belated girlhood in her French marriage. I could expect no sentiment toward England in a child of hers.

'But you can't stay on here,' I growled. 'It's an impossible situation.'

'Will France make it a better situation?'

There she was again, throwing me back to the terrible essentials. Was she right — was she better here, after all? But there was Godefroy; she might see him at any moment. I must get him out of the way. But suppose Godefroy killed me! The room was getting too warm. I felt choked. Then I realized I was walking the floor and stopped and sat down.

'Have you money?' I demanded. 'Have you funds to draw on?'

'Ample.'

'Apart from -- from Lieutenant Godefroy?'

'Thanks to you — yes.'

'Nonsense! That money belonged to you anyway.

Then you could pay for escort to get out of here at any time?'

She had been standing by the window, talking over her shoulder. Now she turned and beckoned. 'Come here.'

I went to her. She had pushed open the heavy casement with its square of thick glass and the wind that had moderated to a light breeze, came full in our faces. The sky was blue now, and a thrush was singing. In front of us the wall of the forest was shining and swinging. A tall slim birch was dipping curtsies to a pine tree like a maid in a pantomime.

'I am not leaving this,' she said.

'Why?'

'I told you I had work.'

'Clerk to a half-breed chief!'

'That comes badly from you who are seeking favors from the half-breed! But let it pass. And there is more. This work — it is my heritage.'

'Your heritage!'

She leaned away from me. 'I must make you understand something. Wait! You did not know — Nicholas Godefroy. He was unusual. He had almost Langlade's power with Indians. He was young, but a leader. He — he loved France. And he had great hopes for this country. Do you — do you see?'

I bowed. Godefroy's name on her lips shocked me.

'You do not see,' she contradicted. 'You can't see because I haven't yet told you. If he had lived — he would have done great things for France. If — if it had not been for me, he would be alive now. So — an

obligation to carry on his work is my heritage; the debt I owe France.'

Still I was silent. If she could talk of Godefroy — well, that was her affair. But I could not. I leaned to the window; a breath of the woods blew in — a scent of early clover.

She lifted her eyes to look at me squarely. 'How narrow you are!'

'Narrow?'

'You think I should not say these things. You are wincing now for fear I will say more. Yet, what I am saying is my excuse for living. Why ask me to talk like a school-girl in an English nursery?'

'I think of you as a child.'

'You must not. I am older now than Helen was when you married — older than Helen ever was. Let me talk as a woman — a woman who knows sorrow.'

'Is it necessary?'

'Yes. For one thing you are hating Godefroy. Yet he was a man of exceptional honor.'

And then I did rebel. But her hand stopped me. 'Wait. Hear me out. Remember one thing. Remember he married Ahnawa, and made her child — his child, legitimate. What other man in his position would have done that?'

'And then he pretended to marry you, and wrecked your life.'

She looked over at the forest. 'He gave his life for that,' she said. 'Yes, he met me — and he married me. But I have come to understand of late how terribly powerful the temptation must have been.'

'You mean?'

'I mean that a man of honor came, through love of me, to dishonor everything that had been dear to him; his church; his faith; his name. He must have been tempted beyond my possible conception of temptation. For all his life had been honorable. So I cannot judge him. As you must not.'

'A man may judge a man.'

'A man who has loved wisely, his head in control, may not judge a case like this. You have been a fanatic to an idea, never to an affection. Yet — I respect your judgment, and would like you to understand.'

I looked at her slender figure; at the girlish leanness of her neck. 'It is terrible to discuss these things with you,' I said, and saw I was clenching my hand.

She flushed; but it did not seem embarrassment. 'And it is terrible to me, too,' she cried. 'It is terrible that a girl is expected to marry and give so little — in comparison.'

'She gives herself.'

'Yes, but how! What can she give beyond a flattered acceptance, yes, and a certain curiosity toward a new life. What — with our manners of marriage — can she know of love! And if the man on his side cares so much; if it brings him to perjuring himself and injuring others — why —'

I seized but one point. She had not loved Godefroy; had hardly known him. Poor child, so she had not even memories to help her. I took her hand.

'Quixotic,' I said, 'but very real, I take it. You think then you owe his memory a debt for the love you failed to give?'

She winced. 'Not quite that, but — you understand?'

I shook my head. 'No. At least I do not agree. But I have never found it matters — what the other person thinks. If the compulsion is on us — why, we must.' I stood beside her, looking at the forest wall. To her that forest was the grave of the man who had killed honor and himself for love of her. To me it was the hiding-place of the greatest horror I had known. Why, Godefroy might be watching at the moment; she might see him! Revolt gripped me. I must handle this situation better; must get her away at once. Yet, how manage her. A woman's cajolery and tears I understood, but not reasoning. And reasoning, too, that cried to a chord in my own heart. One could almost tell her the truth; talk things out frankly. But one must not. I seized my hat.

'Good-bye. Another day — But come away from the window, please. It's an unwise habit in an Indian country — always. Good-bye.' And I went out of her door without a look behind.

Little Nicholas was waiting for me. The cold hand he curled in mine I could take now, and press without repugnance.

'Does Madame Rupert talk with devils?' he began again. 'Does she?'

I was hot with feeling. 'She talks with angels, Nicholas,' I said.

CHAPTER XIV

MORE ENTANGLEMENTS

I was tired, and wished to go to my cabin, and drop like a drunkard. It was but little over twenty-four hours since Langlade's arrival, and in that time I had slept but an hour, and had lived emotions enough to supply a normal man many years. Spirit and body ached. But I must meet Amaiou at sundown. And it seemed best not to return by the woodland détour. When I leaned from the window with Hortense, I had seen Agatha playing ball with Nicholas; I would not seem clandestine, so went by the Langlade cabin.

The Langlade door was open, and I heard laughter and the sound of a fiddle played softly. Some one — the voice was Coutrol's — called me and I went over to the door.

The room was filled — men, women, children. They sprawled on tables, settles, chairs. Langlade, Coutrol, and Amiot the blacksmith were drinking together, and called me to join them. They filled one of the French dram-glasses, and pushed it toward me.

'Our glasses are only fit for a child's tea party,' Coutrol grumbled. 'The English do much better. A dram of their brandy is more a man's size.'

Langlade looked up. 'You heard an Indian say that, Coutrol,' he said incisively. 'That is what the Boston pack-men teach the Indians to say. Who is spreading that sort of talk here?'

I took my glass and went over to Madame Augustine Langlade, the Indian mother. 'I drink to my pleasure in your son's return,' I said. 'You did well to bear a man like that.'

She nodded. 'Yes, he is a man — and so thinks he knows everything, and is blind. He can look a mile away — and cannot see around the corner. You are a relative of Madame Rupert?'

'Yes. Will you wait a moment, please?' I looked around and found Agatha. She was standing by Coutrol's shoulder listening to his chatter. Her smile was supercilious. I went to her and whispered her to come with me to Madame Langlade. She joined me rather contemptuously, but she came. I penned both women in a corner, and talked as softly as I could in the roar of the room.

'Madame Langlade asked me if I were kin to Madame Rupert, and I wanted you, Mademoiselle, to hear as well. Madame Rupert is my sister-in-law — my wife's sister.'

'You are married?' It was the Indian who asked. Agatha kept her contemptuous smile.

'My wife died five years ago,' I answered. 'I have one child. Mademoiselle, you asked yesterday why I had lied about knowing Madame Rupert.'

She still smiled. 'Why did you?' she drawled.

'But I did not. I had never seen my sister-in-law and did not know she was here. I could not explain when you asked me, not knowing how much my sister-in-law wished me to say. Yet I very much wished you to understand.' I could not but smile at myself. 'You see I was between two women — to both of whom I was indebted.'

She laughed at that. All her fire was gone, and she looked tired.

'You are straightforward as a peasant,' she said, 'in matters that do not count. Did Charles tell you about — Madame Rupert?'

'Yes.' I drew Agatha one side. 'May I say, as kinsman, you have been kind beyond all precedent. The way you buried her story is wonderful.'

She frowned. 'That is Charles' work. His will is obeyed. When we can we are as fond of gossip as the rest. You should remember that. But I suppose you will take her away now.'

That flicked the raw. 'Why? Is she not well off here?'

The girl pursed her lips. 'I don't know.' She looked over at her sister Charlotte, who, red-lipped and big-eyed, was perched on a table in reach of her husband's hand. 'I don't know,' she repeated. 'How pretty Charlotte is,' she said irrelevantly. 'But even if one is pretty, it does not pay to be a fool.'

The violin whispered softly. An *engagé* was playing a chanson of the time; frail; whimsical; winsome. It beat in one's pulses. I saw Langlade's hand go out to stroke his wife's arm. I pointed it to Agatha.

'See. That is your answer. Your sister's folly is her strength.'

The girl still frowned. 'Ah, but it is not always music or moonlight. Life is more than that. No, Charlotte must learn not to be such a fool about Indians. It ennuies.'

Coutrol pushed in. 'Come with us to the Indian camp, Le Claire. Langlade is going.'

That was what I desired, even if it made me late in meeting Amaiou, so I went at once. Langlade's wife followed him to the door, purring remonstrances and cautions like a distracted kitten. She was certainly pretty; but so was Agatha. Leopard and house cat! It was strange one family could have bred them.

We embarked in a long canoe which was tied at the door. Three young men were oarsmen. I sat behind Langlade, and he chatted over his shoulder.

'You have a license to trade? There is no fur here in summer except the red deer, which is heavy and little profitable. You stay the winter?'

Now if I were driven from La Baye, I must get west to the Fox nation. With life and liberty, that was my next move.

'I should like to get west,' I returned. 'Even if it is not the fur season I can see the country.'

'Ah, exploration, then — not trade?'

I shrugged. 'All of us novices think ourselves explorers. I doubt there is one of us but hopes he may be the one to find the western sea. But I must get a company together.'

'You have one Indian. Where did you find him?'

'Amaiou? I came from the south and brought him from the Illinois.'

This was a test moment. I expected Langlade to ask if I had come up the Mississippi from New Orleans — which was the only route from the south through French territory — and was prepared to venture a most dangerous lie and say 'yes.' But the canoe touched the bank, and his attention was diverted.

'These are Winnebagoes,' he said as we landed.

'They are from the west.' I wondered if he thought me so ignorant as not to know, or whether he were playing with me.

We found a more permanent camp than I expected. Fifty or more skin cabins were huddled together, and since these portable shelters would hold two or more men each, there were probably over a hundred warriors. Where was Langlade taking them, and what did he plan? I saw no women. Most of the braves were lying on the ground, turning themselves to the late sunshine. Some were gaming; some looking to their firearms. No bows were in sight; all carried muskets. Kettles of bear meat hung on the fires. It was a recent kill, for a half dozen dogs from the Menominee camp were snarling over the head and entrails.

I followed Langlade's heels. It annoyed me to see my Indians peering at a kettle of meat. They had been in the Menominee camp, and I had not seen them in days.

Langlade marked them at once. Indeed they were conspicuous among the Winnebagoes. Their heads were shaved, and they were more shambling; less firmly knit.

'Miamis!' He turned to me. 'Your men?'

I nodded. 'Yes and no. I brought them here. The big fellow was my interpreter.'

He stopped. 'You need an interpreter? You cannot speak the dialects?'

I laughed. 'How could I? I have been scarce three months in this country.'

The Indians were greeting us in divers ways; some

with grunts, some coming to finger Coutrol's uniform and examine my more sober jerkin. They babbled, but I could understand nothing; the Winnebago speech did not belong to the Algonquin group of dialects.

A young Menominee, whose face I knew, came up to Langlade. He carried a small strip of beaver to show he was an accredited messenger. 'Will the eagle listen to the sparrow?' he said. 'I have news.'

I strained to get this, for it was important. But instead of answering the messenger, Langlade wheeled and looked at me. He caught me peering, my face sharpened with attention. It was written large, not only that I understood this dialect, but that I was listening. I heard Langlade's tongue click, and knew his mind was made up about me. He led the messenger away. He had caught me in an open lie, and knew I carried forged papers. The thrill that comes with desperate gaming tingled through me.

Coutrol was gaming in earnest. He was watching the Indians playing the ball and dish game, and took a hand. Now was my time to get away. Not that I hoped to get out of Langlade's reach, for that was impossible. But I was anxious to meet Amaiou while I had liberty; I must learn what he had discovered, and decide what orders to leave with him. A young Winnebago was examining the seams of his canoe and I lounged up to him, and drawing a handful of beads from my pocket pointed to the opposite shore. He nodded, and pushed his canoe toward the water. He did it quietly, for instinct had instructed him well, but, silent as he was, we did not get away. I had just put

foot toward the canoe when Cochon elbowed in front of me.

'Monsieur would go to his lodge?' he said in his guttural French. 'I will take him.' And he gestured toward a canoe in the rushes.

I shrugged acquiescence, for I knew Cochon's persistence. I preferred to keep him at a distance but this was not important, and all I desired was a speedy ferriage. But the Winnebago read my nod, and seeing his fare snatched from him, raised a howl that would have done credit to a London bagman. I grabbed a handful of beads and threw them at him, but it was too late; the clamor had brought Langlade.

He saw the situation. 'Why pay two fares?' he asked crisply. 'Monsieur, why be so lavish!'

I threw another bead at the Winnebago, who was still howling. 'I would give anything short of my skin to stop this infernal din,' I said with an oath. 'My ear-drums are cracking. Monsieur, your pardon for stealing away. I am tired.'

Langlade nodded. 'You should be,' he said with meaning. He thought a moment. 'Go now,' he returned. 'But I will see you to-morrow — to-morrow, early. You will be there?'

I bowed. I saw my rope tightening, and wished I were not so sleepy that I might accomplish more in the remaining hours. 'At your own hour, Monsieur,' I agreed absently, 'I shall await your messenger.'

Langlade pushed his lips forward. 'You will be there?' he asked again. 'I can depend on you?'

So I was let out on parole. 'I will be there,' I

promised. And then remembered my meeting with Godefroy. 'If I am alive,' I added.

Cochon pushed slowly into the stream, and made time slurring his paddles. 'Monsieur is going to the land of the setting sun, to the country of the Foxes,' he stated. 'I will be his guide.'

I snapped my fingers. 'Pouf! Cochon, your ears are like the bat's. You hear things that never happened.'

But he rolled his head sideways and hunched in derision, till I could not but think of how like a fat Chinaman he looked. 'Monsieur desires to go to the Foxes,' he repeated undisturbed. 'He has said so to the Menominees.'

Well, so I had. Since he was sure of his data, I shrugged and let the matter go. Savages gossip like chamber-maids, but seldom outside of their tribe, so I was surprised at Cochon's knowledge.

We drew up to the bank, and I tossed Cochon a twist of tobacco. He weighed it in his hand, and seemed to find the amount satisfactory. 'An eagle is an eagle, and a chief is a chief,' he observed. 'And I have more men than days in one moon, who will follow me. When the chief calls, I listen.' He took himself off at that, but he wagged his head with great meaning as he lifted his paddle. Again I was reminded of a sleek Cantonese who did some dirty work for me once in India. But he had certainly given me another thing to think over. Who had been working with him? If I were to die the next day I would leave many mysteries unsolved. I had the feeling that if I were not so sleepy I might think some of them out.

CHAPTER XV

AMAIOU SPEAKS

I WENT to my hut, hardly hoping to find Amaiou. But he was there. He was squatting on the floor, and had placed a bearskin robe in front of him. He rose as I came in, and pointing to the robe motioned me to sit on it.

Now, to place a man on a bearskin is an act of ceremony, and is prelude to a long, slow-moving discussion. I was in no mood for talk.

'Your news, Amaiou?' I asked curtly, and leaned against the logs of the door for weariness. 'Did you find the man with the half face?'

Amaiou grunted. 'As my brother said,' he admitted.

'You found him?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'On the Manitou. In a hole under the bank where a root makes cover.'

'Did he see you?'

Amaiou grimaced. 'He was asleep. I could have killed him. But you told me to come away.'

I pulled myself upright. 'You were right. To-night I will find him. Have you something for me to eat?'

He nodded and went to his outside fire while I

flung myself on my pallet. I had a restful moment. My open door faced the west, and the last glow of a gay sunset made the sky warm and inviting. I lay drowsily, my eyes on the jagged tops of the pine trees. The stars came out, a frog crooned in the rushes, and the breeze, that had just strength to reach my hand, was soft and perfumed. The chanson the boy had played that afternoon hummed in my ears. I thought of pleasure; of music; feasting and gentle living; of beautiful women, great pictures, and all the arts of life. The world was filled with experiences of which I had had little. And I had risked my life as children chance a knuckle-bone at dibs.

Amaiou brought me a dried gourd filled with hot broth, and bread that he had stirred together out of the yellow maize meal. He was the only Indian I knew who could cook, and he had almost a white man's instinct for it. I emptied the gourd, and smiled to see him watching me. I was growing drowsy from warmth and food and saw I must rouse myself to the night's work.

'Enough, Amaiou,' I began. 'I must to the Manitou before moonrise.'

The room was dark, but I saw the boy throw his head back like a ball-player about to make a throw. He lighted one of our pine torches, and stuck it in its iron clamp. With the door closed, we were protected from outside eyes, for the window of scraped deerskin was not transparent. He buttoned the hasp of the door, then turned to me. 'Have I been brother? Have I been son? Have I been the twin kernel in the nut?'

What did this mean? He had been all these things. 'You have,' I said.

He pointed again to the bearskin robe. 'Then will my brother listen?'

I went to the robe and sat down. This was not a tone nor an occasion to deny. 'I listen as brother to brother,' I said. 'But will my brother remember the night passes and my work waits?'

Amaiou nodded. He waited until I had settled myself to the motionless quiet of a council, then came and squatted before me, though not on the circle of the robe, but with his brown legs hunched before him on the hewed log floor. He studied me a long time; a minute or more; and I examined him. I was to remember this, for he never appeared the same again. At last he pulled his buffalo-skin pouch in front of him, and unfastening the leather thong, groped inside. He drew out a small brown volume.

I took the book. It was a copy of 'King Lear,' bearing the date 1727, and printed by a London house. I held it, with my pulse unsteady. To see words in my own language was like wine, sending my nerves jumping. I forgot Amaiou, and fluttered the pages greedily. A name was written on the title page, and I went over to the torch to decipher the faded ink. 'Duncan McMerrill, Belfast, 1731,' it read.

I went back to Amaiou. He sat immobile, but his look was not on the floor, Indian-wise, but open and exultant on me. I struggled with a wave of baffled loathing. The Indian must have taken this book from the body of a murdered Englishman — and I could not show resentment. Indeed, I must praise.

'Where did you get this?' I asked, my tongue thick with what I dared not say.

Amaiou's blue eyes still held mine. 'From the hand of my father,' he said. And he spoke in English.

If it had been a hostile trap, the game would have ended then and there. For I simply opened my gaping mouth. 'From the hand of your father!' I echoed, and I, too, spoke my own tongue. When it shames me to think of this, I try to remember the thirty hours and more in which I had not slept.

'Yes, from my father. My father read it many times.' The English words, though slow, dripped in my ears like music. 'He said it told of a man whose children were wolves, and turned their teeth on him. I promised I would not act that way.'

I looked at him. I knew I was awake. I knew it was true. I looked at the lank, squatting Indian with his high cheek bones and brown limbs, but with eyes of Scotch blue, and with the teeth and laugh of an Irish ploughboy. 'Then you are not an Indian?' I spoke like an automaton.

He smiled. 'My mother was a Cherokee.'

'And your father was a Scotch-Irishman, named McMerrill,' I cried, and I reached over and gripped him. And I held him. Even the touch of his oiled skin did not send me away. 'Boy, where are you from, and what do you here?'

He grinned. 'I spy,' he said. 'As you do. Did I not say we were brothers?'

'A spy!' I balked at the word even on friendly lips. 'Why a spy?'

'Are you not English?'

'How can you be sure I am English?'

He grinned again. 'The morning after we met the man with the half face,' he reminded me, 'you said, "And may you be eternally damned!" I know the words. My father said them often.'

And then I laughed. It was a nightmare to find myself laughing at such a time; laughing with an Indian as one chuckles with a crony. Yet I did it.

'Why did you not tell me at once?' I cried.

The boy grew suddenly austere; it made him an Indian again. 'Does one babble to a stranger? I had to find what you were doing. If you had come here for skins or gain I should never have told you who I am.'

'And am I not here for gain? Of what else have I spoken?'

'To the French you talk of trading, to the Menominees you speak of English rum and of the better guns the English make. You work underground, but all your tracks go one way.'

I pondered. 'You were coming here when you met me. Who sent you?'

'Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia.'

Again my heart leaped. This was touching a comrade's shoulder.

'Why did he send you here?' I pressed. 'What were you to do?'

He answered as a soldier to an officer. 'Report on the number of men here and the temper of the Indians.'

'So. You have learned that. Why not return?'

He halted. He started to draw his blanket over his head, but thought better of that, and pulled himself to his feet. He stood with his head back, and his face had the exalted look it had worn that morning when I asked him to do some difficult work for me. 'The Great Spirit sent me to you, and you to me.' His voice had the ceremonial chant of the council fire. 'The spirit of my father speaks through you. Where you are head I will be hand. I do not return. I stay with my brother.'

Stay with me! Indeed he should not. I was already hurling him back to Virginia and Boston, laden with letters. I saw a crack in my wall. I might be a doomed man, but my work was not to die.

'Sit down, son of Duncan McMerrill,' I cried at him. 'Let me talk. Stop me when I go too fast, for you must understand.' And so I sat, while he crowded close to me. Sometimes the boy was Scotch, but many, many times I had to go more slowly and use the Indian form of thought.

And he talked too, so that I learned the skeleton of his tale. A tempest-racked soul must have been Duncan McMerrill. Caught and maimed by a falling tree in the mountains where he had a trapper's hut, he had been taken care of by a Cherokee squaw. And there he had remained, with his Indian woman, and dragged out his short crippled life. There had been this one boy — no other children — and I could see that McMerrill had poured his sick longing for his own people into this son, and called the feeling patriotism. He had consecrated the boy. Amaiou tried to make me understand this, calling on God and

Manitou, saying he was to live but for one end. His father, dying, had sent him to Dinwiddie, bidding the Governor use him as he willed. All this I learned by phrases here and there, for it was not our main interest. Our talk was of the French and English situation in this land.

And here Amaiou took the lead. He had things to tell that set me in ferment. He, too, had been ferreting among the Menominees and had uprooted much more than I. It stood like this. The Fox nation had had, since the earliest days, a settlement on the Fox River where they levied toll on the traders who passed. The French had contested this always, and now, after a century of intermittent warfare, they had succeeded in driving the Foxes to the west, near the Mississippi. So much I knew well; indeed, had known long before I left England. What was new, was that the Foxes were now working with belts and messengers among the Menominees. The Foxes as allies of the Iroquois were inclined to the English. So a friendly sentiment for us had been growing among the Menominees even before I came with prattle of beads, rum, and traders.

They were ready, Amaiou said, to demand terms of the French. The Menominee I had seen that very afternoon in the Winnebago camp, who brought Langlade a strip of beaver, had been charged to ask for a conference between Langlade and Old King. Old King was to say the Menominees thought it their right to have the old privilege of the Fox nation, of exacting tribute of passing traders. When Langlade refused, as he would, he was to be told that the links

of friendship binding the Menominees to the French were growing thin and dull, and that if the great White Father gave nothing to his children, he must expect nothing in return. It was well arranged. They would then have pretext for an uprising.

The torch flared, sputtered, went out. We did not notice, and talked in darkness. If baffled emotion can age, that night should have whitened me, for here was my work ready, and I must hand it to another. The Menominees were ripe for a leader, and were inclined to me. But by morning Langlade might have me confined; if, indeed, he did not dispose of me more completely. I saw I could escape to the Menominee camp that night, and get west to the Foxes — Cochon had said he had men and canoes. But I had given Langlade my word. An inconvenient habit. I cursed my ancestry that had made me worship the letter of an agreement. A man's word should not weigh against duty to his crown. Yet I could not bring myself to terms.

Hortense and Godefroy had become but background. And I saw I must not search for Godefroy that night. I must not risk being killed in the dark before I wrote the letters Amaiou was to take to Boston. Those letters! They must burn, bite, and compel. They could not be written by a sleepy man. No, I must rest now an hour, rise at daylight, and prepare my packet for Amaiou before I met Langlade.

Yet I was reluctant to end the talk. Not alone was there still much to say on both sides; I was again talking to an Englishman, for so Amaiou seemed, now that I could not see him.

'Did you know there were three of us here?' I said suddenly.

'Three in this room!' Amaiou jumped to his feet.

'No, no. Three of English blood in the settlement. The old nurse of Madame Rupert's; she is English.'

Amaiou grunted. He was annoyed — Indian-wise — at being betrayed into emotion. He went over and opened the door, so the starlight came in, and I saw him, lank, black-haired, savage. It repelled again, and I had to fight my inner recoil. But the perfumed night air stole in to cleanse and rest me. The room had grown hot and foul, and I rose to fill my lungs.

'Is the old woman your spy, too?' Amaiou demanded. He was still ill-pleased. 'And Madame Rupert — is she English?'

'No, no, the old nurse is not a spy. And Madame Rupert is French.'

'Then why did she come between you and Langlade?'

Now I saw there must be confidence between us, so I stopped and told him the facts of Madame Rupert's relationship. A meager explanation sufficed, for I said nothing of the false marriage, nor what had become of the husband. He did not ask. He grunted at the story, and I saw it meant little to him. I strangled my first thought of asking him to look out for Madame Rupert should anything happen to me. No, she had better take her chances with Langlade and her own people. For Amaiou might prove more Indian than English in his dealing with women. I could not tell. Patriotism and sex do not follow the same lines of resistance.

I looked out. The east was lightening; in an hour it would be dawn. I started to bed but stopped as my foot stumbled at a book on the floor — the book Amaiou carried. I picked it up and held it a moment till I forgot my own stir and turmoil in my pity for that other storm-driven soul. Poor Duncan McMerrill! Poor half-breed son! I went to the boy and put my hand on his shoulder.

'Good-night, comrade. Wake me soon; when the first blackbirds call.'

The lad trembled under my touch, and I grieved for him. Fate had tricked him. He had made a worship of me, and I was not only a poor thing, but he was like to lose me on the morrow. My heart was sore for him. I should have been thinking of my own plans, but my thought dwelt perversely on the boy and his future. Oh, to stay alive!

CHAPTER XVI

A NEW FACET

I HAD not a good conscience, yet I went as deep into unconsciousness as a snake in winter. I have always a secret chagrin over the way I sleep like a sluggard, for all my life my body could dominate my spirit. So now I forgot danger, anxiety, responsibility, all that hung on me, in slumber. The sun rose and climbed, but Amaiou did not wake me. The hours I had planned to use in writing letters, in speaking to Hortense, in shaping my course with Godefroy — they all slipped by while I was absent in unconsciousness, leaving my torpid body a prey to the morning heat and the flies.

It was near eleven before anything roused me. Then a clink of metal jarred into my consciousness and brought me up, blinking and startled. I frowned into the sunshine, trying to gather myself. It took me a moment to see there was a man sitting beside my pallet, and that the man was Langlade.

He laughed at my winking stare. 'You sleep like a papoose. I had to throw my sword on the floor to wake you.'

I scowled. I was unkempt, unwashed, and angry at being spied on. In my sleepy confusion, I remembered nothing but my outraged privacy. 'Who let you in?' I growled.

He laughed again. 'I came in. Why be angry!

You were to come to me. When you did not, I came here.'

I struggled to my feet, and tried to shake myself into some physical and mental array. 'Your pardon,' I said stupidly. 'I slept.'

'So one would see,' he agreed. 'Your appointment with me must have weighed lightly,' he went on with a grin, and I saw my apparent indifference disarmed him. I felt, as I had before, that he wished to think well of me. 'Shall we talk now?' he began.

'In five minutes,' I promised, and went outside to plunge my head into cold water and adjust myself to the morning. It was a fair June day, and I drew long breaths. I was rested and in condition, and found myself tingling for the interview ahead.

I returned, dusted the table, threw a blanket over the disordered bed, and drew a chair beside Langlade. 'It is not a gentleman's room,' I grimaced, 'but it must serve. Monsieur, what will you with me?'

He still grinned indulgently. My personal squeamishness amused him. But he came to business at once.

'What are you here for, in La Baye?'

I sought his eye and held it. 'I have stated my business at least three times, Sieur de Langlade.'

His look did not shift. 'And three times you have lied.'

There was but one answer to that. I unbuckled my sword and laid it on the table between us. 'Shall we settle our difference in the usual way? It is my word against yours.'

'Nonsense!' He picked up his own sword, looked

at it a moment, then rammed it to its scabbard. 'No, we fight no duels. And, after all, what is a lie, Le Claire, in the way of business? Let my words go. I tell lies myself if they serve my turn. But you brought me forged papers, and you pretended not to understand Indian. Now why?'

I took my pipe. 'If I let your words go,' I said slowly, 'it is with the understanding that I am ready to fight you in the matter at any time. If you will not do this, you must take my say. As to the papers — that is your accusation only. Regarding the Indian speech — do you credit me nothing for modesty? That I can catch a word or two in a strange tongue does not mean I can understand or speak it. You build your traps out of flimsy straws. But all this is immaterial. To the point, Sieur de Langlade. Of what do you suspect me?'

He hesitated as if he had not expected to be pressed home in this fashion. 'You may be here for several reasons,' he parried.

'One of them, please?'

'Well, perhaps a sort of a spy.'

'A spy!'

'Yes. Bigot may have sent you to see that Coutrol is not feathering his nest too deeply — though in that case why were your papers forged? — or you may be an agent for another fur company. Your business can't be straight.'

My breath that had caught came back so my ears drummed. Conscious of my own turpitude I had been sure I was an open book to Langlade. I was waiting to be denounced as an English spy, and now he

was accusing me of being a petty French intriguer. My nationality was still safe! I had ado to look as concerned as the occasion demanded.

'I am not Bigot's agent — not any man's.' I found my pipe drawing excellently. 'Though why protest since you would not believe me? Come, if I am not what I seem, what then? What is your proposition?'

He hesitated again. He was Indian enough to dislike to come straight to the point. But he thought a moment, and took the plunge.

'I am in command in this district,' he said. 'You know that?'

'I certainly do, Sieur de Langlade.'

'Then you know I could put you in custody. But I have decided not to do that. I will let you go without further question — indeed, will give you an escort and safe conduct — if you will take Madame Rupert with you.'

'If I will take Madame Rupert!' Of all the shocks of the three days this was not the least. 'If I will take Madame Rupert!'

'Those were my words.'

I got to my feet, scenting a trap. 'This requires explanation, Monsieur.'

Langlade did not rise, and he looked grave. 'She is your sister-in-law?'

'She is.'

'Then what is strange in my asking you to conduct her to her people?'

His tone was so moderate I cooled. I resumed my seat. 'Monsieur' — I tried for equal moderation; 'may I remind you of what I told you the other day?

That I had never seen my sister-in-law until we met here. I knew nothing of her; her life, her history. I come here, and find her in trouble, and in your charge. It does seem to need explanation that you should wish to turn her over to me — to me, a man whom you suspect. I am not saying, Monsieur, that I will not take her; I am saying I wish to know what has come up that you think it best for her to go.'

He dropped his chin on his hands, and considered.

'I think you some sort of an honest man' — he meditated. 'The woman would be safe with you.'

I shrugged. 'You do me little honor. The woman is my dead wife's sister. Has she asked to go with me?'

'By no means; no.'

'Then why send her?'

He still looked down. 'Why keep her here?'

'Langlade,' I said, 'she is trying to help you. Or rather, help France by helping you. She thinks she is succeeding; accomplishing something. Does she annoy you? You see, here she can do what she thinks is real work — and work is the only thing to save her; keep her steady.'

He did not answer. 'You are forgetting,' he observed, 'that taking her means safe conduct for you.'

He was right. I was forgetting. 'I may not be convinced I wish safe conduct. I may prefer your investigation. But, Monsieur,' I examined my pipe bowl, 'Monsieur, I am thinking of her.'

'What are you thinking of her?'

I shook my head. 'I hardly know. She is kin to me,

and she is not. She is not of my blood, and I don't understand her. She is not the kind of woman I have known. But — she holds me by her courage. Monsieur, if possible let us spare her pride.'

'You care for her?'

'I grieve for her. Think of her nights; nights when she drops the mask of day! And her loneliness! Yet she says so little. And now she thinks she is doing something worth while. Even if she troubles you — if she interferes — Well, Monsieur, think what she has been through.'

There was emotion in me, and it went over to Langlade. 'Enough!' he cried, his fingers twisting. He moved slouchingly, turning to the door. 'It is hot here.'

'It is a hot morning.'

'Hot and filthy!' he cursed. 'Look at the flies. Take her out of here! Take her back.'

I stiffened. 'Take her for whose sake, Monsieur? Yours or hers?'

He turned a heated face. 'How can I work with a woman!' he expostulated.

I sat very still. 'Is that a reflection on my sister-in-law, Monsieur?'

And then his face cleared into better lines. 'You know better than that, Le Claire.'

'Then she is intrusive or troublesome, that you wish her away?'

He had no need to answer my impertinence. And I was too heated to care what I was saying. But he did not resent me. He thought of me only as the man of Madame Rupert's family to whom he must make account.

'No, she does not trouble me — so far as work goes,' he said shortly, and he rose and walked to the door. 'She helps me,' he went on, and stared at the threshold. The heat had gone from his face, and he looked weary and perplexed, but something — either his tone or the beaten lassitude of his figure warned me of the nature of his struggle.

It smote me hard. So that was what Agatha and the Indian mother had been hinting. I must take Hortense away; take her, and take her at once — that appeared the only duty on the horizon. What it would mean to my own plans I would not think. I had never respected Langlade more nor feared him as much. I would have left Hortense with Godefroy rather than with him. I flung at the matter like a school-boy.

'It is agreed,' I burst out. 'I will take Madame Rupert. We will leave as soon as you can arrange.'

He turned. 'You change quickly,' he said jealously. He had planned for this against his grain. Now it was hard for him to accept the issue.

'I change — yes. I change on evidence, Monsieur.'

He sunk his head and again examined the threshold. The flies buzzed, the grasshoppers shrilled in the heat. I was in turmoil as I waited. The whole thing was in Langlade's hand. He could dispose of me and do what he would with Hortense. I had bad moments till he spoke.

When he did, he clicked his tongue. 'Enough — go. See the woman at once. I will give you convoy to Montreal.'

My muscles relaxed. 'As you will,' I answered, with my tongue dry. And I let Langlade go out the door without further word. We had both been betrayed into more than our speech showed.

CHAPTER XVII

I AM TAKEN PRISONER

As Langlade walked out, Amaiou came in. 'Good-morning!' he cried in English, and his Indian face was stretched in a Scotch smile.

I had gone to sleep full of consciousness of this boy, but the morning's interview had wiped him from mind. I had to recall myself.

'Well, comrade,' I rejoined, and steeled myself to drop a hand on his shoulder.

He quivered under my touch as he had the night before, and again I was troubled. It is good for youth to find a figurehead to use as demigod. It is an outlet; and since the frailty of the idol is soon exposed, it does no harm. But to find an idol and lose it; lose it while the illusion is untouched; that is a heavy hurt. And I did not want this boy crippled.

But we had no heroics. Amaiou brought me a breakfast of maize cakes and broiled fish, and I rated him for not waking me.

'You need sleep,' he defended. 'A fire cannot burn without wood. And now you must go to the Menominees. I will stay near while you talk to Old King.'

'No, no!' I hated what I had to say, so that my speech stumbled. 'No, no. Amaiou, Langlade has changed my plans. I must leave here. I am to take Madame Rupert to Montreal. Langlade sends an escort.'

Amaiou stared. His face showed bewilderment, then suspicion. 'You have gone over to the French,' he said lifelessly, and drew into his blanket.

I understood, and shared his feeling. I tried to be stern, but my heart was heavy. 'You are a child,' I chided. 'You caress one moment, scratch the next. Let me explain.'

And then I talked a long time. I had a thankless task. I had not only to show him the danger that threatened Madame Rupert — and that was more than distasteful, since I had to put into words, and brutal words at that, what had been only implied — but I had to teach him a new creed. Duty to family and women he did not know. Duncan McMerrill had taught his son to have but one altar, and had named it patriotism. Now I must convince him that the honor of a woman should take precedence. I could as well have prated to a bird of the laws of mating. He drew close in his blanket shelter, and brooded. I was the first Englishman he had trusted, and I was proving a poor thing.

I went to Madame Rupert's, my head buzzing with conflicting plans. I walked slowly, sure of my goal, yet lagging. The splendor of the growing year leaped in me. I had slept, and felt vital, full of achievement. The situation was clay in my fingers. Yet I must leave it, and play squire of dames. Futile! Futile! Yet so my life had been.

The little house of my kinswoman was open to the summer, with shutters thrown wide. As I passed the window I saw Hortense sitting at her great table, papers around her. She was grave as Portia with her

black gown and clerical air — yet the smile she gave me was very young.

She met me at the door, and as I followed into the room I was struck, as on my first visit, with a sense of luxury that seemed fantastic in the wilderness. Yet it was all accomplished, as before, by perfume and cleanliness. The great gourds which had been filled with apple blossoms were now crowded with wild June roses — flecks of vivid pink as virginal as maidens, yet dripping with perfume that was like the voyageurs' chanson — elusive, disquieting. I bent my face to them.

'Hedgerows in Devon,' I said. 'My boy is riding among them now.'

Hortense pinched off a pink spray and pinned it to the black of her gown. 'Is Stuart like you?'

'Not in the very least — save hair and skin, and inches.'

'Like Helen?'

'A hybrid. Crossed blood that has bred a sturdy youngster.' I smiled. 'He has somewhat your eyes.'

She smiled again. I had a swift sense not alone of her friendliness, but of her relaxed content; of her security in my nearness.

'Glad to see me?' I said, as I would to a child.

'Very!' Her eyes were full of quiet pleasure. 'I slept last night. Really slept. You see — well, having you here makes it different.'

'You mean you haven't slept before?'

'Oh, partly.'

So she did know Fear. It is a terrible berth-mate. 'Child! Child!' I growled, and began to walk the

floor. 'Yet if I had not happened to come here you would have fought it out alone.'

She nodded. 'But you did happen. I think — well, the good God arranged it.'

Here she trod where I could not follow. The carved whistle with the red cord caught my eye. 'Have I seen this before?' I demanded.

She took it down and put it in my hand. 'Stuart's,' she said. 'He bit it as a baby. See the mark. Helen gave it to me when she came over when Stuart was two years old. It always hung in my room. So I brought it with me.'

'Chut!' I said. I hung the whistle on its peg, and turned to her. I put my finger under her chin, lifting her eyes to mine. 'So! So! Sentimental, are you, and afraid as well. And you play at being made of iron.'

'I — sentimental?' She did not shift her eyes, but half closed them to show her mockery. 'I — sentimental! Does the pot slur the kettle? Why you — Now, let us take that little matter of the ring.'

'Enough!' I scowled. 'Besides, that is a different sort of thing. Hortense, sit here, for we must talk. Wait!' I pulled forward the rough arm-chair. As I did so I looked down at the table. It was covered with broad sheets of paper heavily crossed with crayon lines. 'Maps!' I ejaculated. 'Maps and fortifications! What is all this?'

She pushed in front of me, spreading her arms over the papers. 'Don't! Don't! These are drawings of Quebec. You are not to look at them. Please don't touch them, John.'

I stepped away. 'Why am I not to look?'

She drew the papers together, piling them, face down. 'You are an Englishman — that is why.'

'What do you mean?'

'How can I show an Englishman maps of Quebec?'

'You are making war maps so Langlade can use his Winnebagoes against the English.'

'I am.'

In three sentences the air had grown hostile. The tenderness of the moment before belonged to another life. We stared, aliens. Then I recovered.

'Nonsense! We're children, Hortense. But you can let me see your papers. That's what I came to tell you. We'll be in Quebec together within the month.'

She held the papers behind her. 'In Quebec together? What are you saying?'

'What Langlade said to me. Hortense!' I felt my smile was a grimace, so strained was the air. 'Hortense, I had a talk with Langlade this morning.'

'About me?'

'Langlade came to me. He wants you taken back to your people. So he came to me — as your brother-in-law. I am to take you to Quebec.'

She stood very still, holding herself in leash. She kept the maps behind her. 'This is your plan?' she pursued.

'It was the suggestion of the Sieur de Langlade.'

'You did not suggest it to him first — hint of it?'

'I did not.'

She gave a little escaping breath. 'I am glad of that.'

'Glad? Why, Hortense?'

She bit her lip. 'I was afraid — but I am ashamed of that thought; you would never use me as tool.'

She relaxed and dropped the papers to her side. 'Yet, surely, John, you told Langlade you would not go.'

'I surely told him that I would go.'

'John!'

I felt blinded. 'Why — why does it seem so strange?' I stumbled; 'my business is here, yes, but with business on one side and you on the other, you are naturally the most important.'

'You said you would go?' she parroted. She took the pink rose from her breast and tossed it on the table. 'Did you, for a moment, believe I would go with you?'

Something snapped. I could not be balked by a whim; could not be patient of it. 'Indeed, you will go,' I cried. 'You must. I don't know or care what scruple is working in you. But time counts. We get away at once.'

'No! No! No!' she murmured, and she stood watching me, holding her head stiff and high.

I stared stupidly. I was considering what I could do with her, and wondering inconsequently why she had thrown down the rose.

And then she did a surprising thing. She looked at my hands where they gripped the chair. I followed her glance, and saw my muscles stood out like cords. But before I could loosen my fingers she had stepped over and laid her soft hot cheek on my clenched fists. 'I wish you wouldn't take it so hard,' she

murmured. Then she lifted her head to look at me very fully and gravely. 'Yet, I think you have always taken everything in the same way. But I cannot — will not — go with you. Not on any condition. That is settled, John.' She turned away and sat on the pile of cushions. 'That is settled.'

I was in turmoil. I must get her away, but I had neither time nor resource to break her will, and the caress had not left me steady. And the tender wild-rose odor was drugging me, making it hard to see anything but the moment in hand.

I turned to my own chair and sat down heavily. 'Can you tell me your objections, Hortense?' I spoke like an old man.

'Yes,' she said. 'John Sargent, you'll listen?'

'I am listening. But it must be brief.'

'It doesn't need to be, since we've weeks before us. Do you realize you know nothing of me?'

'I realize that fully.'

'Yes. But I know a great deal of you. You'll understand better, perhaps, if I tell you what I know. You'll listen?'

'As I said, Hortense.'

'I'll try to say it quickly. Since childhood I've heard of you. I was eight when Helen went to England. Then she married, and didn't return — not until after Stuart was born. Yet, all the time I was hearing of you.'

'Is it necessary to go over this, Hortense?'

'Yes. Necessary for you to know on what my feeling is based. Through the years I've had many accounts of you. They've built me a composite. At

first everything I heard was flattering, and then —'

I could not keep my chair. I walked, and looked at the wall. 'You need not enlarge. We both know I did not make your sister happy,' I said with my face away.

Hortense came up behind me. She did not touch me, but I could feel her near. 'The picture of you varied through the years,' she said, as if I had not spoken, 'but always, through good and ill report, one impression remained — your strength and your persistence.'

'But what has this to do —'

'Just this,' she interrupted. She still talked over my shoulder while I stared at the floor. 'Remember, I was young and unthinking — very gay, John — and so accepted what I heard, and disliked you. I was bitter with you even though I lived on your bounty; on the money you sent our family after Helen's death. That was why, when your lawyer came I would not return your ring. I wanted you to desire something you could not have.'

I faced her. 'But you did return it.'

'Yes.' She stood with her hands clasped, her eyes down. 'Yes. When I came here — when life came to be nothing but endurance — I used to look at your ring. I read the motto many times — "Man shall not live by bread alone," and I came — through my own desperation — to see life in a new way. And I thought — I thought perhaps we had been mistaken — that we had never known you after all. And then — when I was thinking about you a great deal — you came here; here to the end of the world.

It was incredible. It was almost as if it were the answer to something.'

And I had come up against this fire, and been nothing but clay. A thrush sang at the window; a song of midsummer madness.

'Why didn't you let me know at once who you were?' I asked, unsteadily.

And then she turned away. 'You were a spy. You came here with an assumed name, pretending to be French. I had also my work to do. "Man shall not live by bread alone." If you would not be open with me, I had to spy in turn.'

I followed her. 'You are convinced I am a spy?'

She laid a finger on my sleeve. 'Absolutely convinced. I have watched you and your methods. You have no other reason for being here. Remember, I know. You did not come for money. You are here to carry on your life work — doing something for others. You are calling it patriotism.'

'Patriotism!' I echoed. 'Since it is your game as well, I suppose you should know the signs.' I looked at her finger on my arm, small, brown, well cared for. 'So you would hold me by that,' I said, pointing. 'Yet — if I am a spy — why not denounce me — since we both prate of duty?'

She withdrew her finger. 'There is no need to expose you. You can do no harm so long as I keep you here.'

'And that is why I am not to go to Quebec?'

'Of course you cannot go to Quebec.'

I took her hand. 'Come,' I said, and led her to the pile of cushions, and sat at her feet.

'Granted I am a spy,' I argued, 'I promise, if I go with you to Quebec under safe conduct from Langlade, I shall be blind. I shall never use anything I may learn. You believe that?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I believe. I believe absolutely. But I will not go. It would torture you to see things, and not use them. Then, too, I do not wish to leave here.'

The thrush had begun again, pouring out his heart. He befogged me — as did the roses.

'Hortense,' I cried, 'time passes and we waste it. It is almost life and death for me to get you away.'

She drew away. 'But why?'

'You are in danger.'

'The Indians?' She smiled. 'I am not afraid.'

'I do not mean the Indians.'

And then she frowned. 'What then?' She stopped, and her tone grew gentler. 'Will nothing teach you to be frank?' she begged.

Yes, something would. My desperate case forced frankness from me.

'Then have it. Langlade is your danger, Hortense.'

Her anger made her white. She tried to rise, but my hand held her. 'What can you mean?' she accused.

I looked at her steadily. 'I mean only what is very natural. Langlade is coming to care too much for you. You would not wish that.'

'Oh!' Her color came back, with her smile. 'That is nonsense. You imagine. I am brain to the Sieur de Langlade — never heart.'

'But one leads —'

'No, no!' she interrupted. 'You're wrong. A man is in no danger of temptation from a woman's brain. When a man turns to a woman for what she has learned from books, he never admires her. It unsexes her. You know that.'

I shook my head. 'It is an old theory. I have seen it disproved — as at present. Hortense, I know what I say. This will become a bad snarl if it goes on. Your position here will be impossible.'

And then she looked not angry, but pained. 'You forget,' she reminded. 'No man would speak to me of love — Langlade least of all. I am apart. He understands; he has treated me so always. Oh, why should you make me say this!' And again she tried to rise.

I took her hand once more. 'Please! Please!' And because for a time I said no more, I felt her relax. She had tied my tongue. I wanted to storm at her, to tell her she was very much a woman for love, for passion, for any temptation or delight that man and woman can compass. I wanted to point her to Langlade's bastard son, an Indian boy of twelve, who hung about the settlement. But she had made me dumb. She had put it to my taste and honor.

And so we sat silent. The afternoon waned, and the westering sun threw itself at the chinked cabin, and fought its way through knot and crack. A finger of it touched Hortense's hair. The thrush was silent, but a wood-dove wailed from a birch outside the window. I knew I must talk and act, yet all I wanted was to live.

'Well, you are warned at least,' I said at last. 'No,

I'll say no more. But Langlade expects me to go. I was to arrange with you. He will not understand. Shall I refer him to you?'

She thought. 'There is nothing else to do. Yes, send him to me.'

I pricked myself to make plans. 'You really have money enough?'

'As I said, ample.'

'For I may go away,' I explained. 'I may leave at any time. So anything I can do for you I must plan now.'

'What!' She dropped her hand over mine. 'What! go away! You cannot go. That is our compact.'

I jerked my hand away. 'Cannot go! You mean Langlade —' I saw her face, and stopped. 'Oh, you mean it is you who would stop me?'

She folded her arms as if to hug her courage. 'What else can I mean?' she appealed. 'We spoke of duty. You must see I cannot let you go.'

'Then if I attempted to go you would denounce me to Langlade.'

'I — I should see that you were followed.' Her voice was a whisper.

I stared. She had been seeming so tender; so frail and loving. 'So,' I said slowly, 'I am your prisoner.'

And then she smiled. It was as sad a smile as I had ever seen, yet there was humor in it. 'Yes,' she agreed, 'my prisoner.'

I stood up. 'A prisoner,' I pondered. 'Very well. But remember, Hortense, I am not on parole. I do not promise not to try to get away.'

She whitened and started to speak — then checked

it. She drew herself to her feet, and I did not help her. 'The risks you take are for you to decide,' she said. 'Yet, why throw your life away? I shall probably not ask you to stay here long.' Again the ghost smile flickered. 'You need not plan your life at La Baye.'

I did not smile in turn. 'Where I spend my life is not for you to decide,' I said hotly. 'I mean it is outside the province of your threat.' I turned to the table and picked up the rose she had thrown down. 'I may not leave here, but whatever I decide, remember I am not allowing what you have said to cramp my action. In turn, you must not let responsibility to me hamper you. And now I must go.'

She came closer; her step dragged. 'You can't quite hate me, can you, John?' she said wistfully. 'We're too closely knit for that.'

So small and gentle; so close to my hand! I saw her lips were pale. 'A man does not always hate his jailor,' I agreed. But I threw her rose on the table. 'You have given me a hard snarl to unwind. It holds more lives than mine, Hortense.'

'Don't let it cost lives,' she implored, and I wondered that eyes so blue could look so sad.

'Tut!' I cried. 'Don't take it that way. It is a game, Hortense, and I look to you to play your end gallantly. I must go.' And I backed away like a boy. 'Good-night.'

It was well she did not follow me, for as I lifted my foot over the sill a hiss under me sent me high in air and out on the ground beyond. A thick rattlesnake lay coiled on the door-stone, weaving his head

to and fro just where my foot would have gone. I clubbed at him with my musket, but the fear that Hortense would hear made me clumsy, so he slipped away in the dusk. It set me thinking.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DEVIL'S NIGHT

And now to work. At my cabin I found Amaiou still sulking. I plucked myself to be gay, and told him with exaggerated cheer that I was not going to Quebec. But he did not light in turn.

'You wear many skins,' he said moodily, and I saw it would take time to win him back.

I looked out; nearly dark. It seemed the hindering night was always crowding. I consulted our bags of provisions and munched dry venison while I made plans. Godefroy seemed my next move.

I had not thought of Godefroy — in my relation to him — all that day. Now, as I chewed at the venison, I realized I was going to the Manitou with an altered viewpoint. The night before I had been full of self-righteousness and blood. Now I was diffident of my judgment; unsure of values. Godefroy had betrayed Hortense, yes. But he had attempted to kill himself rather than wrong her further. Well, I must see him before I could make plans.

That decided, I left Amaiou without further word, and pushed through the growing dark to the Manitou. It was rough traveling without a light and I missed my way. As I stumbled against tree-trunks and fought with briers, I began to wonder if those letters Amaiou was to take to Boston would be written after

all. I thought this at first in an absent-minded mood of irritation such as I had often brought to more or less dangerous undertakings, but as I tripped and blundered through the clammy dark, a new feeling got hold of me, and I, John Sargent, old to men and dangers, began to shake like a dog in a graveyard.

I shook with fear. Not with any reasonable apprehension such as an adult might know, but with abject animal fear that should shame a man to remember. Yet remember it I have, and gone over it again and again. For I have never understood that hour. The night was full of hands and mutterings. Fingers touched my cheek, now tapping lightly, now scratching with tiny clawed nails. Hands fingered my ankles, and each step brought little whining moans from the rank moss. I was as shot through and riddled with horror as a figure on a gibbet.

I doubt that I went far this way, though a mind astray does not take reckonings. But it is some comfort to remember that at least I did go on; did not consider returning. I kept the Manitou in mind, and cringing and wincing tried to hold my course northeast.

I was thrown at last. Caught from above by a noose of noisome serpent stuff that circled and threw me as if I had been a bull in the pit. Daylight would probably show my captor as a wild grapevine grown in the dank shade till it was slippery with slime, but in the dark it was a loathsome thing, and I slithered to the ground, fighting to be free of it. Yet the ground was little better. I had fallen on moss and small bushes. Something moved out from under as

I fell. I touched a dead clammy substance, and could have screamed, but found it my own hand.

At this I was moved to dash on again, but some fragment of returning manhood held me, counseling me to lie there a moment, whatever happened. The fall sobered me, and though my head was far from clear, it yet served to convince me it would be better to die from wild beasts or serpents, than from lunacy. I had heard of the forest madness. Let me go on again, and I was like to be found at daybreak not knowing my own tongue, and wandering in circles, as better men had done before.

So I set my teeth and grasped the ground. I expected it to hiss and slide between my fingers. That it remained solid strengthened me somewhat. Then I set myself to thinking; thinking furiously of safe, common things. I made myself go up and down Fleet Street, touching the lamp-posts as Dr. Johnson would have done, noting the buildings, and the mud at the crossings. I sent myself through my place in Sussex, watching the peaches ripen on the wall. I went through the stables, patting each horse in turn and filling my lungs with the clover scent of the hay mows. I drenched myself with memory; built a wall around my sanity of all the commonplace of a normal life. Then little by little, cautiously as one gives air to a convalescent, I let the present slip in.

And Hortense slipped in first — inconsequently, as disordered fragments come in sickness or sleep. Why did she dress so oddly? I felt a whim to see her in the caricature dress of the day; in the ruff and wig and farthingale of women I had known. And why

had she worn white the day that Langlade came, and never since? The heat of that thought stirred me, and I ran from it, taking Hortense with me to walk up and down the London street. But this time home thoughts did not calm me. I had placed Hortense there, and the picture of her in remembered scenes made me restless. I was seized in the talons of a home-sickness almost as prostrating as the fear had been. My boy, my home, my own kind; I ached toward them until the pain of it was nausea. The savagery of the wilderness sickened me; sickened me for myself, for Hortense. I had not strength left to wonder if I might be a coward.

But now I could get to my feet, sane again. I pulled myself erect by my enemy, the grapevine, and held to it while I considered. I had been traveling for some time through boggy land, the trees too thick packed to grow to any wholesome stature. This argued hemlock. I knew of no hemlock swamp; such trees as I remembered near the Manitou had been of mixed growth. So I had probably pushed east. But how get my bearings? I had turned many times, and dared not trust instinct. I could not see the sky but prayed that it was still clear, that the stars might help me.

Yet, how to see the stars? I wormed from tree to tree, searching one with branches. But the close-packed hemlocks had sent all their strength aloft, and I found nothing but stunted twigs. I could as well have climbed the flagstaff at Hampton Court.

But with a goal to work for quietly, my heart came back, and my feet were my own again. And at last

I found a tree that was sturdy enough to elbow itself into something like symmetry. There was no branch within reach, but there seemed a substantial one just over me. I took my sheath-knife and cut steps for my toes.

That was soon done. And as I mounted, my spirits rose with my feet. I felt there was some wrong to nature in the ground under me. The Indians called the Manitou 'Rivière du Diable,' and kept away from it. I was of their ilk.

But my branch held no sky vision, and the limb above was out of reach. I must cut more steps. I went to it wryly, for it was not a pretty task as the other had been.

I was working in this fashion, cutting with one hand, and grasping at the lichened tree-trunk with the other, when something called me. It was not a voice. It was a feeling — a sense of breath in the darkness. Again cold moisture grew between my fingers. I held my breath, for my heart's hammering dulled my ears. The heavy silence lasted but a moment, then a voice, nice in cadence though somewhat blurred, called smoothly.

'So diligent!' it said. 'Does the bear seek acorns in a pine tree?'

My hand fell. My veins warmed. 'Nicholas Godefroy!' I cried.

There was the crack of a snapped twig. 'Hush!' said the darkness. 'You are careless of names. John Sargent, shall I shout your own?'

That hit me. 'What are you saying?' I fended weakly, and strained my eyeballs toward the voice.

Well, if the darkness hid him, it also sheltered me. I was unprepared for this. Would the tree-top owl be the next to hoot my name?

But the voice was going on. 'Who said I was Godefroy?'

'No one. Who said I was Sargent?'

There was a laugh without mirth from the abyss under me. 'Chut! Drop masquerade. If I consent to be Godefroy, you are Sargent without more to-do. Tell me. Were you sent here?'

'No.'

'You have heard talk of me in the settlement. Tell me what.'

'Later,' I parleyed. 'But first, how did you know —'

'How?' he cut in. 'My wedding toasts were drunk under your portrait. I knew you, after the first, when you blundered into my camp.'

'You knew me for an Englishman, and spared me!'

'That, too, can be discussed later,' continued the voice. I remembered its smooth insolence from the earlier time. 'But why, my English friend, don't you come down? You are comic, roosting there like a ruffled chicken. I am no fox.'

I said nothing. I belong to the only race that can consciously do grotesque things solemnly. And I really preferred my perch to Godefroy, and the accursed darkness. But I clambered down.

'I was searching you,' I explained, as I shook myself free from twigs and lichen.

'You search in odd corners,' he mocked. 'But there! I need not be a churl.' His voice became

suddenly winning. 'You have been in the Singing swamp. It is a damnable hole. There are many bones there; give thanks you did not add your own. But we cannot talk here. Come, let's to safer ground.'

He started without more words, I behind him. I could keep his track, for the forest parted before him. At the time I thought only of his woodcraft, and cursed my dull heels.

There was no speech till we found firm ground with the fair stars looking down through scattered birch and maple. Godefroy led the way down the bank of the Manitou. 'Rest a moment first,' he said kindly, and pushed me on a couch of bark and leaves.

'Thank you,' I said warmly, and felt for my tinder. The star-shine was dim.

But he dropped a long hand over mine. 'No. No. No light, Sargent.'

'No light!'

'Your face and mine are alike in the darkness,' he rejoined tonelessly. 'This once, I would speak man to man.'

I dropped my flint with an oath at my rudeness, and moved out of eye range.

'Who, besides you, knows I am alive?' came his voice from the shadow.

'No one — so far as I know. I swear it, Godefroy.' Level as he kept his tone, I could somehow get the anguished quality of his suspense.

'Then how can you —'

'I — I had seen you. So could put things together. It's a long tale. First, how did you find me to-night?'

He breathed impatiently. 'I was prowling and heard. I wander at night — fortunately for you.'

I could not but agree. 'You have had my life more than once in keeping. Why have you held your hand?'

His dreary laugh again. 'What profit to kill you! I hated you for being a whole man, and so tormented you. But I would not hinder you. I knew you for an honest man — however bigoted and cold — and you had come to help her. So I've watched over you — somewhat. You were no coward to seek her at La Baye.'

Honesty might be insanity, but I would not withhold it. 'I did not seek her.'

He leaned nearer at that. 'You did not seek her! You mean?'

I bowed, though he could not see the gesture. 'All that you imply. I came for trade. I knew nothing of Hortense, or her — troubles. It was she who recognized me.'

He turned on the moss like a creature on a rack. 'She told you?'

'She sent me to Langlade. Come, I will tell you.' And I did tell him all, save that I was a spy which he could infer for himself.

He listened so breathlessly I could get some measure of his suffering for news of his kind. When I told him Langlade had protected Hortense from gossip, and that neither of them suspected he was living, I heard him murmur, 'God is good!' and marveled that he could rise above himself to say that of anything.

'How do you live?' I challenged, to get away from my own emotion.

He shook himself back to the present. 'Live? Food, you mean? Oh, I can trap. Then my Pawnees forage. No, they are not here. They stay in the Indian camp but meet me at the little island where you found the fire. They think me crazed, so make a worship of me. Tell me. What brought you tonight? What will you?'

I did not find it easy to explain. 'To beg you to go away,' I halted. 'Hortense — she — she may see you.'

He got to his feet with a curse. 'She shall never see me,' he cried. Then he sank down. 'Have no fear, Sargent. I wish to hide even more than you can wish to hide me. I am safe here. No Indians will get near the devil of the Manitou.'

'But Amaiou found you.'

'You sent him. He is off type. You've bewitched him. If a white man comes, other than yourself, I can keep out of his way.'

I twisted bark in my hands. 'Why stay, Godefroy? It must be torture to be so near.'

He gave a cackling laugh. 'Torture! Is it so dark you forget what I am?'

'I beg — I beg your pardon.'

'Never mind.' He dropped his head in his hands, and I cannot forget the hopeless, wearied kindness of his tone. 'Never mind. No, Sargent, there is one thing left me. The two women whose lives I have destroyed are both in La Baye. There are dangers. I overhear much. I must stay by.'

'You may be wise,' I said, and my throat was not clear to say more. For I saw why Langlade was tender to Godefroy when he should have been hard, and why Hortense tried to purify his memory. And I repeat now what I began to feel then, that, with all he had done, there was a largeness about this man far ahead of his time. That he should couple Hortense with the Indian Ahnawa revolted me, yet I suspected he was nearer right than I. He had married this Indian girl. His morals were warped, but the strands were finer than mine.

I yearned to tell him what Hortense had said, of the work she was doing called by his name. But I did not dare. He had paid an inconceivable price for her. He had thrown aside all that makes for decency just to get this girl. Seeing what I had of him, I was appalled at what his soul must have gone through. To want a woman as much as that! No, I would not tell him Hortense thought kindly of him. I would not lay tinder to such a flame.

But honesty on certain lines I could give. If I were made way with I was grimly glad that his capable gun would remain. So I told him of Langlade's plan for taking Hortense to Quebec, and that she had refused to go.

'But why?'

'Why should she refuse to go? I told you she was helping Langlade. She feels the work valuable.'

'Then why should Langlade send her?'

I found myself shuffling the leaves. 'Hortense is young, attractive. Perhaps Langlade finds her disturbing. It may be his wife's suggestion.' I incon-

sequently wished to protect Langlade; was squeamish about voicing what he had implied.

'Oh,' cried the voice. It was like the bark of a hurt creature. Then he took time to digest the implication. 'Langlade is kind; almost quixotic — yet he's the son of a savage,' he muttered. 'You fear him?'

'Fear — and respect.'

I saw him writhe. 'You are strange — you English — so cold, so well in hand. But there is more than Langlade to fear. We must be watchful.'

'I may not be here to watch,' I said heavily. 'Langlade suspects me. Not of being English, I think, but of being an impostor of some sort — possibly an agent of Bigot. When he learns that Hortense refuses to go with me — he may give me short shrift.' I faced toward him. 'You feel no duty to disclose me to Langlade?'

The shadow of his head moved in negative. 'Duty is a privilege'; he spoke slowly — 'I have forfeited that right. Yet I might kill you — for the sake of France — if it were not for Hortense.' He stopped to curse. 'It is little to be false to my country,' he went on, 'when you know where else I have played traitor. And yet —'

'Yet what? You are large to give me free rein, Godefroy.'

He bowed. 'It is the matter of the Menominees. There is danger there!'

'Danger? To you?'

'No, no; to the settlement. You've been stirring Old King's people till they're ripe for trouble.'

The shock of that brought me to my feet. 'Impossible! I've not poisoned the Menominees against the French. I've talked only of English trade; beads, rum!'

'Yes, yes,' he agreed. 'Nevertheless there are mutterings against Langlade. If they revolt, and fall on the settlement — Can you hold them? Can you play fair in both camps?'

I shook my head, and dropped to my seat without answering, for I was hard hit; shaken. I had not reckoned with this danger. It was the devil's mess. I sat in heavy thought, crumbling moss in my fingers. How long, I do not know, but Godefroy roused me.

'It will soon be growing light. I ask you to leave — before we can see.'

I was on my feet. I had a few last phrases, which I stumbled over. I arranged, if I needed Godefroy, to leave a note in the cleft of a tree we both remembered.

As I would have gone, he stopped me. 'The wrong I did your wife's sister,' he brought out the words like an automaton. 'You have said nothing.'

I paced a moment before I could still the anger that rose. 'You spoke of killing,' I said at last. 'When I first heard, I came out here to kill you. But when I see you — Do I need to add punishment, Godefroy?'

I have always wished I had not said that. It was stupid, cruel. I was a prating ass. But when I held out my hand, he took it, and we said good-bye.

I had strange feelings as I walked back through the growing light. I had been through the most

incomprehensible devil's night of my life, but with it all, even with all the horror of that face that I had talked with in the darkness, and that I was conscious of, even when I did not see, I was yet curiously exalted. It is not given to many to talk with one whose self has been crucified, and something purifying stayed with me from the contact. I took more than I gave that night.

CHAPTER XIX

I CARRY WATER ON BOTH SHOULDERS

To bed at dawn, troubled and confused. Noon, before I woke. I might, perhaps, have been a man to accomplish things worth while, could I have managed with less sleep. But I had always an accountant's mind in that matter. Without a clear balance-sheet of sleep I was a log.

It had been chilly at dawn, so I had crawled under a blanket. Now it covered me suffocatingly, so that my face was damp. Yet I lay, hot and still. What next? What Godefroy had told me of the Menominees filled my horizon. If he were right, I was blocked, defeated. I must move no further. So why not doze, and let the stream drift by! The Menominees were not a menace — unless I stirred them further. Let me lie quiet and the trouble would still. As to Langlade, he would hear soon enough that Hortense refused to go to Quebec. I would not haste my feet to spread that news. There were, to be sure, those letters to Boston; they must be done. But writing is an old man's work. I sighed as I threw off the blanket.

As I moved, something dropped, clattering, from blanket to floor. I picked up a string of wampum; a necklace of bears' claws. I handled it, zest for life returning. So I was not to be allowed to sleep! I felt the prick of a live issue.

The noise brought Amaiou, and I held up the necklace. 'The Menominees?'

He nodded. 'Mickinac brought it this morning.'

Now Mickinac was a chief's son. 'And it means?'

Amaiou shrugged grudgingly. 'They give bears' claws only to a chief.' Dour as he looked, he could not keep pride from his tone.

I clapped him on the shoulder. 'So we are called in council. Old King should have sent you the wampum. You would make the better leader.'

I took a dip in the river, and came back to conciliate Amaiou into getting me something to eat, for I hated cookery, and my stomach was crying for something warm. But I found Agatha in possession of my door-stone, and dropped beside her. Agatha was always better than food or cordial in making me alive, and also I would not enter the house with her there, for she was disturbed by no conventions, and might follow. She must not see the wampum necklace that lay on my bed. So I sat at her feet and told her what was most evident — that she was looking very fair.

She appraised my compliment, and found it lacking. 'Fair, yes,' she agreed with a frown. 'But what of my clothes? Do you like them?'

I looked carefully and saw unwonted preparations. She had a blue canvas half-kirtle, and a bodice laced with blue, with white cuffs that turned back from her round arms. A broad white kerchief around her neck made her demure and domestic. The result was certainly becoming.

'Becoming, yes.' She dismissed my verdict with a wave of the hand. 'But is it — you're fresher from Paris than any one here — is it modish?'

Modish! A wolf howled in the timber and I looked over at the smoke of the Menominees' fires. Modish! 'For whose undoing do you plan this?' I cried.

She shook her head, eyes aslant. 'That I tell later. Answer my question first. But perhaps you do not know.'

Oddly, I did know. Costume had always interested me — or rather, had always fixed itself in my eye. There was a language to me in the whim of the moment in wig or furbelow; they were reflections of something behind. So I remembered them. Plainly as I dressed myself, I could yet play censor. Now I shook my head.

'No,' I admitted. 'You are all wrong.'

Instead of looking crestfallen, she sparkled. She was getting what she wanted. 'Ah!' She breathed satisfaction. 'I thought so. Where am I wrong?'

'Crinoline,' I said ruefully. 'Skirts are enormous. Instead of the pretty figure you have now, you should look like a butt of Madeira. Wait! I can draw it.' I went into the cabin hot-foot lest she follow, and brought out crayon and paper, which I balanced with a book on my knee. I went at my drawing with zest. It was a happy interlude, and I was interested. I was enamoured of my Lady of Fashion when I finished with her. Crinolined, patched, wigged and wasp-waisted, she could have held her own at Versailles.

Agatha peered. There was no levity. 'So that is

it,' she pondered. 'It must be done. But how to do it?'

'For whom must it be done?' I reminded her. 'Your share of the bargain?'

She turned. 'I wonder if you will like the news. An Indian runner came this morning. Le Corne and a company of officers are at the Pottawatamie Islands on their way south to Cahokia. They should be here to-morrow.'

I felt at bay. 'Why should I not like your news?' I asked lazily, and took out my pipe. 'It sounds like gayety, and we've certainly not been surfeited with that since I've been here. I've heard of Le Corne, but never met him. So it is his subjugation you plan?'

But she was back studying the drawing. 'There will be a dance,' she said absently. 'I've no hoops, of course, but there's wire in the storehouse. Could I stiffen trading cloth with wire?'

I agreed she could if she used wire enough, and wasting not a minute, she took the sketch and was off to the storehouse. 'You have been really kind,' she told me over her shoulder.

I went in to eat my dried meat, not caring whether breakfast was hot or cold. I had pepper enough for one day. Le Corne's coming was certainly a blow. He was an officer of repute and daring. If I escaped detection with him I was indeed a child of fortune.

But first to the matter of the wampum. I put it in my pouch, and rowed to the Menominee camp. It was a fine day, but over-warm, and the village was yawning out of doors. Men, children, and dogs

were largely asleep, and much under foot. Some of the women were pounding corn, beading buckskins, a few were scratching at the wilted field of maize. A shriveled hag called to me for brandy, and offered a gourd dipper in payment. It was a nauseating place; dirty at best, and now the heat exaggerated the odor of the moist, unwashed bodies and the decaying stuff on the ground.

I chatted here and there, then made my way to Old King. The skin flaps of his lodge were drawn back, and through the murk of tobacco smoke I saw the old man squatting within. I paused.

'Will my brother take me by the hand and lead me to the council fire?' I asked. 'His belt is in my hand; I am here.'

I counted a hundred while he kept me waiting. Then I crawled through the opening, stumbled over the bones and refuse that clogged the entrance, and squatted by him while he gave me a coal from his pipe.

'My brother has been away from my arms two sunsets,' he said.

I took the necklace and laid it between us. 'Brother, by this token I swear I could not come before. But my heart was never parted from you. What does my brother wish that my friendship can supply?'

What my brother wished was a long speech-making. I had been indecently direct. So he took to smoking in silence while I choked and cursed, and waited.

At last he began ramblingly, with so much brothering, so much likening me to suns, chains, and eagles

that I had ado to see where he was heading. But it focused finally into a virtual demand that I show my hand. He hinted at large plans, but waited for me to come out from cover before he would say more. What was I? I had kept him puzzled as to whether I was English or renegade French. Now he implored his brother, the eagle, to stop hiding behind the pinions of a hawk.

I puffed awhile. 'For my brother I would wish my heart open as the sun at noon day,' I said, as I blew smoke rings. 'But there are ears in the ground and tongues in the leaves. What I am, I shall tell in good time. In the meantime what cares my brother what plumage I wear so long as my eye is keen, my claws sharp, and my heart beating to his cause? My brother has chosen me as chief. Has he grown old and afraid that he should not stand by his judgment?'

He let that pass. I had flattered his vanity much in the past, and he was old. He wanted me near him. So he began to talk again, and at last what I dreaded was out, though with talk enough to dam many rivers. Their young chiefs were restive for action, and were singing their war chants. Langlade had replied to their belt, and made promises, but still denied their right to exact toll on the river. That gave them a grievance, and they planned, under my guidance, to fall upon the settlement.

'I tell them you bring rum,' the Old King concluded. 'And rum is much stronger than the French brandy.'

This was worse than I had feared. I counted five hundred to keep my tongue from betraying my terror.

I spit at the entrance. 'My brother has drunk of the rum, or rather of the bad French brandy,' I suggested, 'so that his eyes are blind, and his tongue wags with the chatter of crows.'

Indians do not resent insult in this form. It means argument which they live by. So Old King met me quickly.

'So my brother's heart is water,' he observed. 'My brother would rather sit in the warm house and play with the women.'

I pushed the wampum aside. 'My heart is red,' I said curtly, 'and so must your eyes be that you do not see. Listen, brother. I want talk of old men over the council fire, not chatter of boys. Have you gone moon mad to talk of falling on the settlement?'

He grunted. 'Settlement and fort are dry leaves. We could crush them under our moccasins.'

'As you say,' I agreed. 'Your moccasins could step on them, and not know what they touched. But what then? A baby can pull a bow to pieces, but he cannot put it together. After you had crushed fort and settlement, what next?'

Old King bared his teeth. 'Old times would come. We would take toll. There would be quiet. Deer would come to the water side.'

'No!' I shouted. 'There would be no quiet. Crush the fort, and the great Onontio at Quebec would send men to crush you. You would be worse off than now.'

He forgot to blow smoke in my direction. 'Would my brother have us sit like women?' he came back at me.

'I would have you sit like men. It is women who talk and rattle. I would have you wait silent till I can bring help and arms. Then your young men can put on their war paint and this place shall belong to you as it did to your fathers.'

I finished breathlessly. I feared I had been too much in haste; used too little imagery. And I could make nothing of Old King. He resumed his pipe, and crumpled in his blanket.

'My brother asks me to chain my young men as you tie dogs,' he grumbled when I prodded him. 'I will smoke on what my brother says.'

I had to have something more definite. I picked up the wampum. 'I take this,' I declared; 'my brother sent it to me as to a chief. But since I am a chief I insist that my brother must not let his young men wear war paint till he has called me in council. Otherwise I kick his wampum from my lodge.'

He muttered and nodded, but would make no promises. I placed a skin of rum on his mat, and went away sick with fear. I had stirred a nest of cobras.

CHAPTER XX

MORE PETTICOATS

Leaving Old King, I went hot-foot to my cabin. For the moment I must crowd the Menominee danger to the back of my mind. For with Le Corne's arrival threatening my liberty, the letters to Boston must be written at once. The hated task was on me. I took my camp portfolio, and went to it with a groan.

But I had scarce wetted my ink before there came a tap at the door; a feminine tap; small, discreet. So Agatha was back! I frowned. The wampum was out of sight, and my papers were not tell-tale, but my conventions were disturbed. I flung at the door with anticipation and reproof.

But it was Hortense. 'You! You!' I stammered. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' Her face reflected my confusion. 'Nothing's wrong — as yet. I may come in?'

I hesitated. 'Shall I come out?'

She shook her head. 'I'll come in — if you're willing. If any one sees — Well, I want to establish rights of possession.'

I admitted her dumbly. I blushed for the room. Not that it was bad to a man's eye. I am orderly by habit, and Amaiou had been trained by a Scotch father. But at best the room was dingy and rude, and Hortense had somehow imposed certain niceties of

judgment on me. I put her in my chair, and stood before her.

'Now,' I said. 'Possession, is it? Possession of me?'

She nodded. 'Yes, ostensibly. I've bad news. Le Corne and his followers come to-morrow.'

'So Agatha told me.'

She twisted an eyebrow. 'What shall we do?'

I laughed. 'Conceivably, nothing.'

'But these men will almost certainly detect you. Their ears will be critical. Your accent —'

'I've imposed it on the people here.'

'They are uneducated, and their ears are dulled with Indian speech. Believe me, you are in danger.'

I leaned on the table beside her. 'I know. But it's all in the game. And, really, how does it concern you?'

'You were the husband of my sister.'

I shrugged. 'No need to drag that in. You defined our positions yesterday. Let it go at that.'

She looked at me as at a stiff-willed child. 'You take it coolly.'

And then I laughed sincerely. 'You pay me small compliment, Hortense. If I had not settled all this with myself months ago, in my safe room in the Strand, I should not be here.'

'You won't listen to me?'

But I gestured that away. 'Assuredly I'll listen. Only, we must both remember the basis of our relationship. It is an armed truce.'

'Pouf!' she exclaimed, and rose to walk the floor. She stood in front of me, and I knew had I been the

age of pinafores I should have been shaken. As it was, she descended to wheedling.

'Be good, John,' she begged softly. 'If I can help you — and care enough to try — won't you let me?'

What to do with her — and with myself! And at any moment the war drums might sound across the river! Let me live while I could. I took her hand, and led her back to the chair.

'Agreed,' I cried. 'I'm a bear, Hortense. If you can civilize me, I'm grateful. Now what's your plan? Possession, you say?'

She flushed. 'I wonder — it will be but for a day or two — I wonder whether you'd be willing to shelter yourself behind my petticoats?'

'What can you mean?'

She paused, and looked out the open door. 'Since I heard the news this morning, I've been planning. I see but one way. That I vouch for you is your best safeguard. And my wishes carry some weight with the Sieur de Langlade, and perhaps with Le Corne. So you must be identified with me closely. Am I right?'

'Possibly.'

'Then let's go further. These men are less likely to observe you if they think lightly of you; judge you harmless. I wonder — would you play the rôle of hanger-on?'

I sobered, and considered this gravely. 'Play your spaniel? I think your wit is right, Hortense. If they consider me a family appendage that you patronize, they may ignore me. It is worth a try.'

She nodded. 'And I may treat you familiarly, order you about?'

I bit my mustache. 'You may.'

My tone was too curt, and she paused. 'Are you agreeing to this because you believe in it?'

I straightened. 'Forgive me. I hate it, so am surly. But I'd hate worse to lose my neck. Yes, I'll play your masquerade, Hortense, and be grateful to you.'

She brushed her finger-tips across my knuckles. It was a gesture I was to learn; her way of saying 'thank you.'

I put my hand in my pocket. ''Ware, Hortense. I'll trick you yet, if I can. I'll get away. But Langlade — what will he think?'

She shook her head. 'Keep away from him. But he'll not notice you if you're careful. You're not new. He has you catalogued. He'll be thinking more of the officers, and himself. But,' she hesitated. 'Agatha Bourassa is dangerous. She is keen; she is your friend?'

I whistled. 'Heaven in its mercy knows.'

'Well, that you must manage.' There was a smile in her eyes. 'I wish you looked more the macaroni,' she mourned, and considered me, her head on one side. 'You look too self-reliant, too stern.'

'Clothes will help that. I brought fallals in my pack. I can look the middle-aged fop. But my accent —'

'Lisp,' she interrupted. 'Lisp when you can — whenever Langlade is not listening. But don't try that with Agatha. And say little.'

'And laugh more,' I suggested. 'I think I see your pattern.' I pulled a camp-stool near and sat down. 'And, Hortense, for yourself?'

'For myself?'

'The straight, strange gown,' I said haltingly. 'Must you wear it?'

She looked down at herself. 'These gowns trouble you?'

I hesitated. 'Not trouble me, perhaps. But they make you alien. They isolate you, like a nun's habit. They set you apart.'

She rose. 'You seem to forget. I am apart.'

'Wait!' I cried. 'Let's not go into that. What is in your own heart — that I can't alter. These gowns are a symbol to you, but must you impose them on the rest of us? They may be a symbol of something we don't believe.'

'You must believe,' she returned swiftly. 'Listen. Officers drift through here often. It is an *entrepôt.* I wore different clothes at first. Then I took these as refuge.'

'The men have troubled you?'

She walked to the door as if to breathe more deeply. She had always a way of holding her head gallantly. As I saw her now in silhouette against the open door, there was great grace and spirit in her.

'Some men have made me know I am still young — and perhaps unprotected,' she said quietly. 'No, don't protest. It is not serious. But you see the reason of these gowns. In them, I stand apart; no one will meddle. I can help Langlade, and no one dare talk.'

'Le Corne has been here before?'

'He — and others. Think no more of it. I bought material and made these gowns myself. I have one of softer white that I can wear to-morrow — to-morrow when you fetch and carry for me at the dance.'

I stood over her. 'Don't go to the dance! You surely do not want to go?'

'Tut!' she said. 'It is better to go than make comment. Besides I am not sure that I would not like to go, John.'

'John?' said Agatha from the door. 'And I thought, Madame Rupert, that Auguste was your kinsman's name.' What had she heard? At least we had not spoken in English.

'May I come in?' She balanced on the door-stone, a figure of mischief and pique.

'Can you come in?' I parried. For she had slipped off the greatcoat she wore, and behold, the crinoline of the morning's talk was reality. It frolicked about her as unmanageable as a puppy on a string. 'Can you get that inside?'

She stooped, gathered the wired mass with both hands, and peered at me. 'I can manage this. But do you want me?' She turned to Hortense. 'Tell me, does he want me to come in?'

What would Hortense do! There is a theory that all women are difficult with each other. Well, I could not interfere. But Hortense wagged a wise head. 'Want you? No. He doesn't want either of us. He has sterner matters afoot. But if you do as I did, you will come anyway.'

Agatha nodded. 'I will,' she decided, and tilting

herself sidewise flurried through the door. Then she let her billows escape, and turned on a pivot. 'Is it right?' she demanded. 'Look carefully. Is it quite right?'

I looked. But before I could answer, Hortense slipped in front of me. 'It's wonderfully right!' she exclaimed. 'How did you do it? You don't know how pretty you look!'

Agatha did look pretty. The hooped skirt was of pink stuff, and as she came out of it slim and glowing, she looked a vivid Amazonian flower.

'But is it modish?' she demanded again, and now she transferred her attention to Hortense.

I wondered if the word 'modish' would stir Hortense's sense of absurdity as it had mine. But apparently not. She considered Agatha gravely. 'Yes, I should say it was. Crinoline was coming in just as I left Paris. And you have the right line. How did you know?'

Agatha nodded at me. 'He told me. He drew me a picture.' I saw Hortense's lip twist at that detail, but she let it go by.

'You're a credit to his drawing,' she said more sedately, and went back to her chair.

Agatha scorned the remaining chair, and balanced herself on the table. Her eye roamed for a new subject. 'So his name is John,' she soliloquized.

Hortense chuckled. 'John! Yes. Do you want the rest of it? Jehan, Auguste Phillipe, Molyneux, Louis, Le Claire.'

She tripped the names out as a woman rips a seam; the stitches tumbling. I looked in amazement, as did

Agatha. And she was worth looking at; clear-eyed and spirited, her features cut on fine, clean lines.

Agatha did not answer, but she continued looking. And I saw her forget me, her furbelows, everything but Hortense. 'It is no wonder,' she said under her breath. 'It is no wonder they all desert me.' She slipped from the table, and went over to face Hortense.

'You ought to get away,' she said soberly. 'Why wouldn't you go with your kinsman here?'

Hortense whitened. 'You mean?'

Agatha snapped her fingers. 'Play fair. Oh, I know. You talked with Charles this morning, and Charlotte listened and told me. You told Charles you thanked him for his offer of escort to Quebec but you had not finished your work here.'

Hortense sat still, her head high. 'I am not finished,' she said lifelessly. 'I told the truth. Why should you women wish me to go?' Her tone was unutterably tired.

'Don't,' cried Agatha. She put out her hand with a protecting, gathering-in gesture, as a woman picks up a child. 'Oh, I meant nothing unkind!'

Hortense looked up. 'But you don't want me here!' Her eyes were lifeless. All her defenses down.

Agatha frowned as if she too were pricked. 'Listen! I think you'd better go because you don't belong,' she expostulated. 'Perhaps — perhaps, Madame Rupert, we are jealous. I can copy pink skirts, but —'

'Jealous!' Hortense sprang to her feet. 'Jealous! Do you say that to be cruel?'

Agatha met her eye for eye. 'Jealous of you? Yes;

very jealous. Jealous of what you are. That is why I say go back to your own people.'

Hortense quieted. 'And what would you have me do back there?'

'Do? Take your right place, the place that belongs to you.'

And then Hortense's head lifted, and her spirit with it. 'What place would you have me choose?' she asked in level tones. 'Shall I be outcast or adventuress? No other place is open.'

'Hortense!' I exclaimed. But Agatha motioned at me. 'Hush! Go away!' She caught Hortense in her arms. 'Crying! You goose!' I heard her whisper, and then she turned to wave me frantically from the room. I went into the lean-to, where I sat with Amaiou. I sounded him on the possible danger to the settlement from the Menominees, and found him surprised and somewhat incredulous. He thought the fear ungrounded. After a few minutes I heard the two women leave together, and neither of them had the manners to bid me good-bye. I smoked while I reflected on the belief that women in trouble distrust their own sex. It occurred to me that perhaps the theory had been invented by a man.

Then I went to my letters. My talk with Amaiou had calmed me. He said that even if trouble were brewing, there would be days of talk and feasting before anything would happen. We were certainly safe for a time.

CHAPTER XXI

DISGUISES

It showered that night, so morning came with shining leaves, fresh-washed skies, and drifts of birds that chattered and dried their plumage on my door-stone. It seemed a good omen. My first waking move was to use my spy-glasses on the Menominee camp, but I saw nothing to disquiet me.

Le Corne's bateaux came in early from the north. I sat unregarded in the shade of my door and watched them arrive. Six slim canoes, they fought gallantly against the current, swinging in time to the men's singing; a voyageurs' chorus, shrill and gay. The canoes were black with age, pitch, and oil, but the convoy flashed in the water like a tanager's wing. For the men were bright as spring-decked pigeons. Their buckskins shone with beads and they sported red and orange in cap, belt, and tassel.

Through my glass I could see them disembark at Langlade's warehouse door, and found it a pageant. They were thirty in number, five to a canoe. No Indians among them. Le Corne landed first; tall, aquiline, stooping — the greyhound type, somewhat frayed with years and weather. He was followed by a turbaned negro who carried a greatcoat and a traveling case of leather. It was a curious sight; that black-skinned servitor in the forest. There were two officers with Le Corne and they presented themselves

to Langlade with ceremony. I was interested that they had not halted at the fort, but swung at once to Langlade's side of the stream. In a few moments Coutrol came skurrying over in his canoe.

The canoes beached below the warehouse, and the work of examining seams and sorting cargo began. It seemed a good time to present myself. With every one occupied I would be a nuisance, and brushed aside. So I arrayed myself freshly and went down the stream.

I found the settlement buzzing. The Villeneuves, the Jourdains, Mons, Souligny, Amiot the blacksmith — all were out. They were clearing the warehouses for the evening's merrymaking, piling the skins on the dry ground outside. I walked across the creaking warehouse floors where the sun, crawling through crack and door, made gold paths in the dust, and looked for Langlade. I had not been in the warehouse since the rainy morning when I learned about Godefroy, and the smell of the hides brought the moment back in detail. And since then I had held Godefroy's hand, and called him friend.

I found Langlade, Coutrol, and the newcomers in a group outside. Langlade stood with his hand on Le Corne's shoulder; an intimacy I had not before seen him show. He presented me briefly, called me a trader, and did not mention my relationship to Madame Rupert. He was not absent-minded. He simply wished me away, and was scant civil about it. The group had been talking of Montreal for I caught the word as I approached. But so long as I stood there Langlade took the talk, and held it resolutely to

canoes, trade, and weather. I was to hear no secrets.

I made his ordeal short, and left them. Langlade spoke of the supper and dance that evening, and I made the proper acknowledgments, saying I would come. The other men scarcely noticed me. Their eyes were straying toward Langlade's house where there was a show of colored muslins in the doorway.

I got away with the elation of a boy who locks the door on his school-master. I had been afraid Langlade was noting my visits to the Menominee camp. This time he would not care.

I took Amaiou across to the camp, but we separated on landing.

I found Old King huddled outside in the shade of a tree, and settled beside him. I gave thanks at first for being out of doors. But I repented. There was decaying fish on every side, and as the sun rose higher I could have welcomed the shade of the tepee. But Old King was satisfied. He had a bag of corn, and was sorting it in little piles on the ground. He was occupied, impatient of my presence. I took my pipe and smoked while he built piles of corn and muttered to himself.

I suppose I sat for hours with my feet crossed under me, waiting for that aged, dirt-caked savage to give me my cue. For there was method in those piles of corn, and I had to arrive at them. I did not like the look of the village. Squaws were chipping arrow-points, and I heard the dull droning of a drum. It came from a tepee where the flaps were drawn, and I missed several of the young braves. And all the time the smell of putrid fish kept my brain fogged with

nausea. For with me brain and stomach must always march hand in hand.

The interruption, when it came, was not mine. The Pawnee slave, house servant of the Langlades', came sneaking, trembling through the camp. He had a rough passage. Even the children roused themselves to throw a stick or a knuckle-bone at him. He was shouting my name — or an Indian version of it — and when he saw me plunged to my knees and gave me a folded paper.

There was nothing fogged in my mind while I unfolded that sheet. It was addressed in Agatha Bourassa's scrawling hand, and I knew before looking what it must contain. It would warn me to flee, tell me Langlade had discovered me.

I knew even as I tore open the note, that I was bound to guard Hortense, and must not go.

I read it breathlessly. There was but one line. 'Tell me,' it said, 'how must I wear my hair tonight?'

I laughed till Old King grunted. I spread the paper on a wallet that I carried in my pouch, and went to work. 'Puffed out at the side — this way — and powdered,' I wrote, and drew a picture of a much-puffed head.

I gave the paper to the squirming Pawnee, and added a handful of beads to salve his bruises. This roused Old King. It was painful to him to see beads disappear. He watched the retreating Pawnee, who was again running the gauntlet, and held out his own hand.

But I kept both hands busy with my pipe. 'My

brother has withdrawn his face,' I said. 'What would my beads mean to him? They have no tongue. Once my brother's favor made the sunshine. To-day are clouds. Is my brother so old he has forgotten how but one sunrise ago he called me to be one of his household? Is my brother a snake, to change his skin?'

Old King grunted. It did not seem his day for speech.

'The woods are full of evil spirits,' I went on. 'They must have been hurtful to my brother. His eyes are clouded. Does my brother feel his work is done? Does he make piles of corn to count his bad deeds that he may give belts for them to the Manitou?'

Old King looked up from his corn. I had rubbed the subject of his age till he could stand it no longer. 'My brother wanders in his talk like a blind man in the woods. I am a strong man. I am the head man of the council. These piles,' he touched them lovingly, 'are the chiefs I have slain. Here a Mingo, here a Renard, here a Shawnee.' He droned a war chant as he pointed, and his lips curled upwards like a fighting dog's. It was not fish alone that nauseated me now. The air was sick with blood lust. Old King chanted on, describing his exploits in revolting detail. When I thought of him as an ally, I longed to throttle him. War has some decencies; this was butchery.

Yet I sat there full an hour more. So long as I sat and prated, Old King could not hatch mischief. And I made him laugh at last, which he enjoyed.

Before I left I secured a grudging promise, pledged by a strip of beaver, that the hatchet should not be lifted unless they let me know. I saw nothing of Amaiou, and rowed to my side the river with a heavy heart. And in this mood I was to play the clown.

I went to Hortense first. Suzanne made mysteries at the door, telling me her mistress was busy, and I could not go in. So I mouthed at the crack.

'Does your kinsman, the lap-dog call for you this evening?' I inquired.

I heard a rustle of paper, and a sound as if scissors had fallen. 'Yes, please. At sundown. We have supper there — and John —'

'Yes.'

'And, John, will you care — I mean, will it annoy you — if I wear the strange, ugly gown?'

There was a new quality in the voice — new youth. It caught me. 'No, no!' I stammered. 'I think you are right. Yet, you somehow belong to jewels and damasks.' I mumbled the last sentence. I do not know that it went through the door.

I found Amaiou waiting at the cabin. He was choked with news; disturbed. He had found the war kettle on the blaze; the mess brewing. I saw from his distress he felt the settlement must be protected. The Scotch blood had come uppermost. He could not see white men butchered when there was no quarrel afoot. But though he saw peril, he did not think it near. He explained there was a mode of procedure — a ritual he would have said, had he known the word — that must be gone through. This would take days.

I tried to believe, but deep in me was not sure. Close contact with whites might have weakened the Menominees' tribal traditions. They might move more rapidly than Amaiou thought. But they would certainly not move that night. So my next move was to play my part; insure my safety that I might be of use on the morrow. I asked Amaiou to help me make myself gay for the evening, and speculated on what he would think of my fineries. Would Scotch austerity or Indian love of gewgaws prevail?

He proved all Indian. He helped me untie bales that had not been opened since Boston, and grunted with real excitement as pumps with paste buckles, and a flowered waistcoat came to view. The wig delighted him; I had to stay his itching fingers or he would have clapped it on his own head.

I shall not soon forget that hour. One moment amusement and excitement tingled in me; the next I was cold with anxiety at the horror the morning might bring. To array myself for an assembly in the forest, with a blanketed Indian as valet — that was spice for any game! But war drums were in my ears, and terror and remorse were clamoring. I was a pendulum of feeling.

Finished, my few inches of mirror told me the result was passable. My hair, which I was wont to wear in a black-ribboned queue, was hidden by a white curled wig, which rolled far on my shoulders. My coat of claret satin was full-skirted, frogged, and button trimmed. This was fairly decorous, but an embroidered waistcoat of yellow, and black knee breeches gave me the further coloring of a long-legged

waterfowl. I adjusted the ruffles of shirt and cravat, took my cornered hat with the gold fringe, and went to meet Hortense. Amaiou's eye was greedy, as it catalogued my splendors, and I was convinced that some day he would steal the gilt tassel from my hat. As he did.

I minced my way into Hortense's presence, brought my heels together, and lisped my desire to know whether I suited.

She looked me over without a smile. She seemed, somehow, nonplussed. 'John, you are certainly clever,' she said soberly, and looked down at her gown.

The gown was new, I saw, soft and clinging, cut as the others had been, but less severe. There was a difference; perhaps it was in Hortense herself. For one thing, her curls were freer, higher piled. I lisped again, and swore, with my hand on the third button of my waistcoat, that simple as her frock was, she was yet very beautiful.

But she scowled at me. 'If you lisp again, I shall scream,' she said tartly, and slipped into a long coat of blue satin, saying she was ready.

We stepped over the door-stone together. We had but a few paces to walk, but I prolonged them. Yet I did not speak. So I forced her to it.

'Was I very cross, John?'

I steadied a sudden well of laughter out of my voice. 'It did seem you might have remembered I was following your instructions,' I accused. 'Tell me, do I look my part?'

She swept her fingers over mine, which was her

'forgive' as well as 'thank you.' 'Perfectly. You're wonderful. That was the trouble. I do not like to think of you as a man of fashion, John.'

I took the arm under the blue satin coat, and held it firmly. 'Child, child,' I said, 'are you as young as that? So young as to trust my gray hair and gray past as pledge that all youth has died in me?' And then we were at the warehouse.

CHAPTER XXII

FESTIVAL

ALWAYS men have loved to dance on tight-ropes — else jugglers would have no occupation. I look back at Hortense and myself that night, and see us as marionettes, dancing to Death's fiddle. For some manner of madness — something warm and reviving — had entered into me, and it blotted the past and blurred the looming terror of the future.

Only the present existed. And in it I stood arrayed as a mummer, with gayety rising in me as a fume. I had started out to play a part; the part played me.

And Hortense, too! I did not know her — save that instinct within me cried that this was her real self. Some contagion, perhaps, she caught from me; but more, I think, was due to Agatha. Agatha had restored something to her the day before, some self-respect, some belief in herself, some security in her place among women. So when her laugh joined mine she was, for the moment, a woman without care or memory.

Board tables had been laid in the warehouse, and the two score of us at supper sat insecurely on planks balanced on cross-sections of logs. There was food in profusion; fish, game, and hot bread of maize flour. One dish was new to me. It was called by its Indian name of pe-we-ta-gah, and was made of dried venison pounded fine and cooked with maple sugar and

bear's oil. It was more than palatable. I do not remember that it occurred to me that evening that I was eating the food of my enemy. But it did occur to me that the food was very good, that my appetite had been abused for a long time, and that I was eating like a child let loose in the store closet. There was wine to be had, but I drank sparingly.

We took our seats at random, and chance gave me the fat Madame Jourdain. She felt, as I did, the viands of importance, and resented talk. So I was left free for Hortense. But I had to contest my claim. Le Corne was seated on the other side, next Madame Langlade. The board was narrow, and he talked across.

He centered first on me. 'The gentleman's name I have forgotten.' He swung his long fingers negligently. 'A relative of Madame's?'

Here was my cue to say little. I smiled, and left it to Hortense.

She dropped a finger-tip on my arm. 'A very near relative—my brother-in-law. Surely, Sieur Le Corne, you have met Monsieur Le Claire?'

He nodded. 'Ah, yes. But names mean little to me. I've seen them change too readily. Madame Rupert, you grow young.'

Hortense showed her white teeth. 'So you bring flatteries from Montreal. They are light cargo, my dear Sieur.'

His eyes narrowed. 'I can make them heavier,' he said shortly, and looked away.

But we were not through with him. Hortense was talking to me of her childhood, using Helen's name,

speaking of her nurse and other homely things. Her sentences were swift, deft, with little rushes of laughter. I could feel Le Corne listening. He turned to Madame Langlade.

'A mistake, dear Madame. Relatives should not sit side by side. It ennuies them. And no one should be ennuied at your board. Let me help you.' He lifted his voice. 'Monsieur Le Claire, Madame Langlade and I feel that relatives should be separated. So you and I will take our covers and exchange.'

I looked at Madame Langlade for deliverance, but she smiled pinkly, and saw no guile. 'Yes — come,' she said.

I have, of course, learned not to talk in anger. So I smiled vacantly, and gave myself an air of permanence by taking more meat on my plate.

'Come, Le Claire,' Le Corne persisted.

I lifted my brows at Madame Langlade. 'It may be a temptation. But can a gentleman admit that one of his household wearies him, Madame?'

Hortense interrupted with a snap of the finger. It does not sound a pretty gesture, but she made it so, just as she made it intimate by a show of smiles and waving fingers. 'Go, Auguste,' she cried. 'If the gentleman's ship has indeed weightier cargo than he has shown, I should like to try it.'

I bowed, and gathered knife, fork, plate, and drinking-gourd. But before I could rise, Hortense dropped her handkerchief. Our heads were near as I stooped for it, and I thought it a ruse and lingered. But all she had to say was 'Never mind.' And I could con-

strue that to mean anything from hearts to handkerchiefs.

Madame Langlade welcomed me with a happy yawn. It had been an exertion to talk to Le Corne. I was of the family and she need not practice the little arts which really bored her except when she tried them on her husband. With him she was content to flirt for hours. She looked me over with squeals of admiration; even patting the curls of my wig.

'You're finer than anybody. Though Le Corne looks nice, too. Charles will never get proper clothes. Each time he goes to Montreal I beg him. Tell me' — her tone took a soberer turn; 'tell me, how did you happen to bring these clothes here?'

I felt she wished me to say I had heard of the social life of the Langlades, but I told her the truth. 'Because, when I try new scenes I prepare for the unexpected. I was careless of clothes when I was young. But I have been over the world a good deal, and find there come times in every life when one's tailor counts more than one's character.'

'But you know about clothes yourself,' she defended. 'You showed Agatha. Doesn't she look pretty?'

I had not seen Agatha before, for she was at the end of the table. I caught my breath. Her dark hair was puffed and powdered; with her rose pink gown, her firm white shoulders, and proud brown face, she shone in the torchlight like a Venetian canvas. She was not modish, she was mediæval. She was sparkling at the officers. It seemed she should win whomever she wanted. I said so to her sister.

She lifted her shoulders. 'Le Corne told her there was no one like her on this continent. Yet he does not look at her. Watch him now.'

I did watch him, but felt he catalogued easily. He was a strong man, arrogant, successful, older than I, and probably cleverer. He was richly dressed, but negligently, his fineries rubbed and tumbled. He had great ease of bearing; the secure aristocrat. Also he had affectations. His negro slave stood in the corner and Le Corne summoned him occasionally to fetch water or a dropped handkerchief. He was attentive to Hortense, but rather guarded. I could not be sure what he was getting at her hands.

After supper we stood in groups while the space was cleared for dancing. I kept with the women, and was able to outflank Langlade. He was eyeing my ruffles and looking somewhat grim. In juggling the tight-rope with him, even the weight of a ribbon was important. I saw him eyeing Hortense, but he greeted her but formally.

I stood with Hortense while the fiddle was tuning. 'Will you dance?'

She drew back. 'Oh, no,' she said, and for the breath of a second she was the old Madame Rupert. 'Certainly not. And you?'

I hesitated. 'It is my rôle, I suppose. It will save me from talking bad French. But it is my place to dance first with you.'

She shook her head. 'If with you — then with others. Best not.'

The music began; one fiddler, the clerk who had played the whispering chanson at the Langlades'.

I do not know the name of what he played. But I know of what he was playing. I think he did not see the cabin in the northern forest, with its crew of adventurers who ranged from satin to buckskin. He saw tropic lands, and weaving bodies, slender, brown, glowing. He played them to and fro — notes in a rhythmic dust. Now hurried, now languorous, he wove his strains like threads in swinging damask. He played of youth and its fervors, of age and its unrest. His melody worked into the veins till the blood was swaying. He played alone, and there were few people on the floor, for it was not a dance to call by name. I looked at Hortense, and her eyes met mine. Her lips were parted, her breath came fast. I do not remember that I spoke to her. But in a moment I had her in my arms, and we swung out on the floor.

I said we were mad. Never had I danced like that. The floor was uneven and badly waxed, but drifting on the swell of the music we went over it lightly, as down on breeze. The rhythm of our steps never jarred, and I do not know who led. It was as if the weaving melody took pattern from us, rather than we who were following. Sometimes I waked for a moment to know that I was mad, and that I was exulting.

The music stopped. Hortense glowed; her eyes were blue torches. All eyes were on us.

'Wonderful!' she breathed. 'But I shall not dance with any one else.'

'You must.' I saw the line forming toward us. 'Here they come. Hortense — answer me quickly — do you regret we did it?'

She looked as if I had asked something of importance. 'No,' she whispered.

I resigned her to Le Corne, looking the other way as I did so. Then I danced with Madame Langlade, and apologized for stepping on her toes. But all the time my blood was singing.

I made my way to Agatha, and she turned her back on Coutrol and shook her head at me. 'I did not know that you were this sort.'

I gestured at myself. 'Referring to my raiment?'

'Yes, and your dancing, and — well, your manner and all.'

I held out my arm. 'Will you dance? My dear young lady, human beings are not paper dolls to have but one flat side which they show continually. Why shouldn't I be peacock as well as owl? There's not one of us but has a little of both in the make-up.'

She danced well, and let me whisper flatteries. The northern night was pleasantly cool, but we grew warm from the dancing and the heat of the torches, so I drew her to the door. It was a still night, and the stars were near. They hung above us like bands of cut steel, throwing off flames of pink and sapphire. Boughs of fir were nailed to the walls of the room behind us, and their odor met and mingled with the fresh night smells until the air was thick with balsam.

'A land of spells and necromancies,' I said under my breath. Agatha was not listening. 'Where did you learn to dance?' she asked moodily. 'I thought I knew how — but you —'

I was looking at the evening star, and wondering if it flamed over England with such pure trembling light.

'My mother taught me to dance — or had me taught,' I answered. 'I was taught as soon as I could walk. My mother had a passion for beautiful motion. All her life motion meant to her what color and music do to some.' Something had snapped in me, and I wanted to talk. 'We were rather plain people,' I went on. 'My father was often austere. But there was a touch of the pagan in mother — always repressed. She wished grace of body for her children — while my father coveted good morals and sound business heads.'

Agatha pondered me. 'So you are your mother to-night?'

I laughed. 'No, I'm myself. Just as I'm also myself when I'm sober. We're none of us mother or father. For good or bad, we're new units.'

She looked me up and down. 'I like you,' she said placidly.

'Pouf!' I said, and took her arm. 'You like us all, Agatha. Myself, Le Corne — we're all rats to your piping. Yet I covet your liking.'

Agatha's teeth flashed. 'My liking, yes. But whose loving?'

'Loving?' I winced from the word. I had been hurt sorely. 'Loving? Most of it's spurious stuff. Who's to know the real? But liking! There's something worth while; real, dependable, clear air, fresh water, essentials.' I turned her in my arm to face me. 'Tell me, Agatha, don't you want my liking?

It happens I never gave it so freely to a woman before.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Is that a usual sort of offer from man to woman?'

'I would not care to offer you a usual thing.'

She appraised me without laughter. 'I suppose the good God makes us alike sometimes — men and women. So we understand. Because from the first —' She broke off to eye me impishly. 'You're sure you don't want more?'

I shook my head. 'But what I do want is important to me.'

She rocked with sudden glee. 'Oh, I do like you!' she averred again, and gave my arm a pinch like the bite of a puppy. 'Come, let us dance.'

We ran into Langlade, as we stepped inside. He called my name, and I excused myself to Agatha, and joined him. He was scowling; I think he felt at a disadvantage in the gayety. But he need not. He was heavy and ungraceful, carelessly dressed. But always he was leader; and a man like that can never lack dignity.

He spoke to me civilly, and went at once to the subject of Hortense. 'Madame Rupert tells me she prefers not to return to Quebec. You are glad of that, Monsieur?'

'No — on the contrary. But that is her decision, and I accept.'

He nodded. His look altered, and I saw his lip lift triumphantly. Yet he tried to teach his face decorum, and I think he was teaching his heart the same lesson.

We stood side by side watching the dancers. Hortense whirled by with one of the officers. She smiled and nodded at us; her curls damp, her lips red and curving.

'She is clever and beautiful,' Langlade said heavily, 'and gay. And you —' his eye enumerated my splendors till I blushed. 'You, too, are gay, Monsieur.'

I bowed. 'As I told your wife, I carry fripperies. Does my gayety offend you, Monsieur?'

He paused as if considering. 'It astonishes me,' he said shortly — 'knowing what I do.'

'Do you wish me to ask what you know, Sieur?'

'Not to-night. Not while we hold fête,' he said courteously. 'No, go your way to-night. Your kinswoman is waiting.'

Was he threatening? It seemed unimportant; it concerned only myself. I forgot it wholly when I again danced with Hortense.

Once more the world sang with melody; once more we made harmony with our mated steps. If I was not as swept out of consciousness as before it was because I felt it yet more deeply. I halted Hortense near the door.

'It is a white night. Will you look at the stars?'

'No, let us dance.'

I could hold her closely for we were poised to go on. 'Hortense, they are watching us. I ought to tell you this is not wise.'

She leaned in my arm with a foot pointed for the next measure. 'Wise? It is madness,' she said in a clear, still voice. 'But the mischief is done. You will

pay for this. I brought you to it, but you will pay. That is the way of the world. But let us dance.'

As we swung round the room, I saw Caron looking in. I was troubled. He was the only Indian from the Menominee side whom Madame Langlade tolerated, and he seldom took advantage of his license. He wore trousers, and a dingy military coat, as grotesque in his way as I in mine. I guided Hortense to the door, and motioned to Caron. But he avoided my look and slipped away. What was afoot? He was always indifferent to me, but not hostile.

'Please see what he wants,' I begged Hortense.

She nodded. 'I'll slip out this door. Stay here, and see no one follows.' She caught her blue satin coat from its peg and was away before a head turned to mark her.

I waited, too anxious to make pretense at jollity. She was some minutes away, and it seemed long. When she entered, her look beckoned, and I joined her at the door. We were not noticed; the floor was crowded; the dancers engrossed.

She drew me outside. 'Caron was looking to warn me. There's trouble in the Indian camp, John.'

I whirled. Across the river the Menominee fires burned brightly, and I could see scores of figures. They were not on us yet, and the river was between.

'Quiet, Hortense. What more did he say?'

'Nothing. Nothing but to tell me to go home, and stay there. And not to tell any one. What is it, John?'

With the sickest panic of my life tearing me, I somehow kept my voice careless. 'Just an Indian

quarrel with the Winnebagoes, I should say. But you best go home, for I'm going over to see Old King. Make my adieus, please, to Madame Langlade.'

'John, you're going to the Indian camp?'

I pointed her across the river. 'See, Hortense. It's quiet. There's no danger. It's really a slight occasion. But I want a talk with the Menominees. Ask Langlade to see that you get home. I mustn't waste time. Do as I ask, won't you, and don't worry.'

She put out her hand as if to hold me, then drew back. There was a moment's silence. The music cried a handbreadth away; the starlight powdered Hortense's curls. What might happen to her — because of me! I was frozen, dumb, wasting a precious second. I saw her throat move and choke.

'Good-bye,' I said, jerkily.

'Good-bye' — she leaned toward me. I could have kissed her, but instead I handed her to the door, and went without a look. I could not kiss Hortense at that moment.

CHAPTER XXIII

PAYING THE PIPER

However time pressed — and I was abject with fear — I must stop to enlist Amaiou. So I forged to my cabin. I no longer saw cold starlight; the air swam red. And when I waked Amaiou I found my tongue rebellious; furred with terror.

My horror and stress caught Amaiou, and he wasted no time questioning, but took my directions. He prepared a package of trinkets and a keg of rum for the canoe. While he was doing that, I took the letters I had written, folded them small, and stuffed them in my powder horn which had a false bottom. As we ferried the stream, I gave the horn to Amaiou, impressing on him that if anything happened to me he was to get the letters to Virginia to Governor Dinwiddie. The Governor could read the letters, and forward them to Boston.

At the Menominee side I left Amaiou with the canoe hidden among the rushes to await my call. Then I plunged to the village.

The village blazed with fires and torches stuck in the ground. Kettles of dog meat simmered. Every one was awake; women stood gaping, naked children ran under foot. A circle of warriors squatted around a painted post, and the war drum was droning.

I pushed through women, dogs, children, and sprang into the circle of braves. Until that moment

I was unconscious that I had left hat and greatcoat at the warehouse. But at the gasp of astonishment from the savages I looked at myself. In the red torchlight, satins gleamed, and the white wig rolled at my shoulder. The warriors around me, daubed with vermilion and crested with feathers, were not stranger than I.

The war drum stopped and a murmur rose. Hostile or not, I was not sure. Old King spoke from his place near the fire. He was painted in alternate stripes of red and yellow, white circles for eyes. He smoked a long pipe trimmed with eagles' quills.

'What does my brother?' he asked.

I folded my arms, while I stamped the ground. I caught the glint of my paste shoe-buckles shining like star-points.

'Am I called brother in mockery?' I cried. 'What are your wampum and your pledges — straw for the birds to peck. Here you sit in council, and I, whom you called brother, was not summoned.'

A murmur again circled; this time warmer. I was amusing them, and undoubtedly they liked my fineries. Also they knew I carried some store of rum.

Old King made room, pointing to a seat beside him. 'We called, but my brother's ears were stopped with eating,' he said amiably, and dropped his pipe to lean over and finger my shining buckles.

The war drum began again, with a droning chant from the women. Mickinac, the young chief who had brought me the wampum, sprang into the circle, and began a rambling speech in a high sing-song. He recited the glories of the past when their tribe

held the river, and the discomforts of the present, when the white men were stinging flies. He brandished his war axe, calling on the Manitou to help him rid the woods of noxious insects. He went over the same ground again and again, using images of every fish and fowl. He was young and shapely, and I felt that many of his dancing steps, and much of the hatchet-waving were for the women outside the circle. I did not get much real war conviction in his rambles. Yet he knew white men's blood. His belt was trimmed with scalp-locks, and I could see European hair. My gorge mounted.

Old King handed me his eagle-feathered calumet, and I forced myself to put it to my lips, and puff a few times. Then I took refuge in my own long pipe which I had had wit to seize as I went through my cabin. So I smoked and listened and watched. I did not think the feeling high. Perhaps ennui, a childish wish for change, rather than real war lust, was driving them. It was foreign to precedent that anything should happen that night. If they followed usage, they would work themselves into hysteria with this sort of thing, but before they went out to kill they would strip off their gewgaws and get away quietly. Yet I could not tell. Caron had felt the night might develop into a surprise attack. And my fear that the Menominees had grown careless of tribal habits, seemed confirmed. I saw irregularities in their dress; some of them were not painted. It was a lax occasion, and lawless. I knew they wanted liquor. It was midsummer, with few peltries to dispose of, and so they were short of brandy.

I listened and smoked, while children and squaws crept near to finger my coat-buttons and curls. Other speakers followed Mickinac; much the same thing, but tamer. It arrived nowhere. The war drum began to be almost soothing; the drone of a great bee. I could see lights at the warehouse down the river. They were still dancing and would be till daylight. And daylight could not be more than two hours away.

My nerves were jumping from the long inaction — although my body was numb from having to sit like a tailor — when Mickinac sprang back to the circle. He had thrown away his battle-axe, and had a long quivered bow nursed in the circle of his arm. He tossed his black braided forelock out of his eyes, and gave a singing note, the hiss of a snake and the call of a flute in one.

Then he began a swift, pantomimic cry to his brothers to rise and slay before the sun should come and find them sitting like squaws beside their fires. He was swift as a flame, every word biting. I felt myself pushing upward, and had to crowd back. I must hear more. His long bow pricked down the river to the lights of the white man. He reminded his audience of the canoes waiting in the river. Let them but dip their paddles in water, and in a moment they could dip their hands in blood.

A surge of desire stirred the circle. I had been misled. They were not apathetic. Fire had been running under grass; now it flamed. If Mickinac had stopped at that moment, I could not have held the situation. But love of his own rhetoric

carried him too far and I had time to get into the circle.

I faced Mickinac and we stared. He drew back as if to strike me out of the way, but I tore a ruffle of gold lace from my sleeve, and pressed it on him.

'By the high moon,' I cried, 'I swear my brother's words are honey. I give my brother this lace as sign that we wear the same color; but I, too, have a story. May I speak?'

Mickinac looked angry, but he took the lace. Gold lace was new, and he could not put the occasion by. A swell of cries arose.

'Follow,' Mickinac cried to me.

I caught the end of his long feathered bow. 'Not till you listen. Does the bear submit to go to the council-fire with his muzzle tied? Answer!' I tore off my satin coat, and flung it on the ground. 'There lies my token. Will you listen?'

A moment's pause; a ticklish moment. The issue balanced in feather scales. I think my pretty clothes gained the respite.

Fresh fuel had been thrown on the fires, and the leaping red light showed my yellow broidered waistcoat, my white cambric shirt with its ruffles of lace. All things strange and new might be supernatural. And I was indeed strange.

'Speak, brother,' cried Old King, and the council grunted.

I contrived to get in front of Mickinac. 'You will listen?' I demanded.

Old King settled back, and resumed his calumet. 'Speak,' he said again.

I swung around to command the circle. I marshaled myself as if my whole life had been but a pathway to that moment. I called on all the wit that life had taught me, and strained it to the breaking. I spoke of the English first. I drew a picture of them waiting behind the mountains. I told them that if they struck that night, they lost the chance I offered of bringing English rum and trade. I told them to wait my move. 'You call me bear,' I cried at them. 'But does the bear fight in winter when everything in Nature is against him? No, he stores his strength in apparent sleep till the summer makes him ready. So must you.'

I could not say all this smoothly. Indeed I could not get through a sentence without interruption. Some of the braves were impatient of me, and wanted to follow Mickinac. Others cried questions, demands. I had to shift, scheme, parry. I felt very cool. For one is cool when there is no middle ground between death and success. If I failed that night, I could not conceive myself as living. If it were indeed I who had stirred these savages to attacking the settlement, if I were to see them use their scalping-knives on the people I had sat with at table a few hours before, then I could not think of facing another sunrise. And I felt so steady in my determination that my mind worked double — saw inconsequent objects as in a glass.

I saw the dance down the river and thought how the music would drown the noise of approaching canoes. I noticed how the sweat ran down the bodies around me. I thought of Hortense waiting in her

room in the dark; the room that smelled of pink roses. I even saw the gleam of the satin coat with its jeweled buttons in the dirt at my feet, and the face of my London tailor floated in front of me. How stricken he would be could he see his handiwork now.

And all the time I talked — laughed — promised. Sometimes I felt I had lost them; that they were slipping through my fingers. Then I parried, caught them again. I was conscious of time, but could not let myself free of my tension long enough to judge it. Through the red flame surrounding me I could feel the white radiance of the stars, but I did not dare shift my glance long enough to look up to them. Was it growing lighter? Was daylight near? I could not tell. I must not look ahead. And I did not realize my body was hot, till I had to stop to brush the sweat from my eyes.

At last, somewhere over the roar of my own voice and the murmur and rustlings of the savages, I heard the shrill nest-note of a bird. That was a dawn herald. I let myself think a moment ahead. The circle was quieting. I dared not build too much on that. It meant they were waiting; not that they were convinced. I put my fingers to my mouth and whistled three times.

A few of the braves jumped at the whistle, and began to threaten. But I laughed at them, and told them they were mice, and they sank back. That gave Amaiou time to climb the bank.

He carried a rum keg, and brought it into the circle with a stride that he meant to make majestic, but I could not help thinking — with the whimsical, alert,

under part of my brain that would not stop working — what an astonishing bronze tapster he looked with his arms clasped tight around the keg. He set it in front of me, and stood guard at my side.

Then, with one foot on the rum keg, I proceeded to make terms. Peace and liquor was my bargain. I ground them to an agreement, with one eye on the keg. I took Mickinac's long feathered bow — he gave it grudgingly, but the keg argument brought him — and holding it in front of me made the chiefs come one by one and lay their hands on it in fealty to me and my plans. They came in line like ants to the honey-pot. They were starved for sensation; for excitement. Killing would give it to them; so would liquor. And the liquor was at hand.

We broached the keg. I stood guard over it like a thrifty licensed victualer. I was doing a terrible piece of juggling; so terrible I could not look at myself openly. If I gave the savages just enough rum, they would be amiable; wax to my moulding. Too much, and they would forget their pledges and go down the river, their scalping-knives drawn.

For two hours and more I sat beside that keg playing tavern-keeper; and all the while I was talking, talking, talking. I saw day rise and grow. And one by one the group fell away; some to their lodges, some to roll over on the ground to sleep. They were not stupid with drink — I had been too niggardly for that — but they were warmed and relaxed by the liquor, and tired with their emotions.

So I sat there till I was the only one awake. Even Amaiou slept, his ever-present knife held loosely.

Then I pulled my head up, and looked at my surroundings. The bodies around me were foul and disordered, but overhead a blue morning was full of purity and peace. The friends whose bread I had eaten were sleeping down the river, unfrightened; unharmed. I looked at the bow in my hands. It was pledge that the settlement would not be harmed till I gave the signal. Could I hold the pledge? I fell to trembling. The sweat dropped between my fingers. Then I waked Amaiou, and went back across the stream.

CHAPTER XXIV

A FORCED ISSUE

In some fashion I reached my cabin. I swayed as I entered, and falling into a chair, dropped head and arms on the table.

I heard a step beside me. 'Go away,' I said thickly. 'Let me alone.'

'Are you hurt? Tell me,' cried Hortense's voice.

I staggered upright, holding to the chair. 'Where did you come from?'

She looked small and pitiful. 'I've been in the little back room since daylight — waiting. Are you hurt?'

'No, no.' I obeyed her gesturing arm, and dropped back in the chair. 'Not hurt — only tired. Go now, please. This is no place for you.'

She went out, so I thought she had obeyed, and let my head fall again, but she was back in a moment with a soft cloth and a wooden trencher full of warm water.

'Wash your face and hands,' she commanded. 'I have hot soup waiting.'

'Hot soup — for me!'

'Yes.'

I washed my face, looking at myself dully. I was black with soot and sweat; my coat was gone; my white shirt torn and splashed with dirt and liquor. There was a flapping rent in my silk stocking.

Grease marks patched me, where squaws and children had fingered my clothes. I was an offensive scarecrow, but it did not seem important.

I drank the hot soup, and revived somewhat — not entirely. The world was still far away.

'What happened in the settlement?' I roused myself to ask.

Hortense sat watching me drink. 'Nothing,' she answered. 'Absolutely nothing. I went home as soon as I could — as you told me; I listened all night, but nothing happened.'

'You saw nothing of Caron?'

'No.'

Caron had not been in the Menominee camp, and I suspected he was guarding Hortense's cabin. As I still think he was.

'Did Langlade and his wife take you home?' I went on.

'The Sieur left soon after you. He was standing with Madame Langlade when I told her you had gone. I did not see him again.'

'Then who took you home?'

She hesitated. 'It was unavoidable —'

'You mean it was Le Corne.'

'He will not trouble me again,' she hurried. 'That's over. What happened to you? Tell me.'

'But about Le Corne?'

'I have told you.' Her head lifted. 'He will not trouble me again. But I have sat with horror all night, thinking about you. Will you tell me nothing?'

'There's little to tell,' I said wearily, propping my

head on my elbows. 'Caron exaggerated. But the Menominees were feasting — so I stayed.'

She rose. 'So you won't tell me. Well, I will go and let you sleep. But, John —' she paused and considered me — 'John, how do you do it? What is your power?'

Her awestruck tone got through even my fog of exhaustion. 'Power, child!' I lifted my head. 'Look here, Hortense, it isn't any power in me. Don't get false notions. My hold is something degrading. Something you'll hate.'

'Nonsense!'

'Not nonsense!' I cried. 'See here, Hortense, take the truth. Do you think the Indians tolerate me because of any charm of mine? Not at all. My cargo is principally rum, and they know it.'

'But Langlade gives them brandy, and even he —'

'Listen! Here's the whole western situation. The Indians want to get drunk — thoroughly drunk. We white men have taught them that. Now to get satisfactorily drunk on French brandy costs them a beaver-skin, while they can do it on English rum for the price of a mink. How do you like my power?'

I had flung the words like an angry child. I was so sickened with the night's horrors and debaucheries it seemed I could not clean my mind and spirit. To make allies of these brutes! It made me one of them. As well go to His Majesty's Zoo, and make allies of the lions and hyenas!

Hortense stood silent for a moment. 'So nothing is diplomacy?'

'The diplomacy of beads and the rum bottle,' I

growled, and would have said more but there came a heavy knock at the door and Langlade walked in.

He stepped over the threshold and eyed us both. I was trapped — caught fairly. My clothing in itself showed where I had spent the night. There seemed nothing to say, so I kept still.

He looked at Hortense and scowled. I was afraid of what he might say, of what he might suspect. For the situation did look odd, and he was a savage. But I was to learn then, and later, that Langlade was a just man, and weighed his judgments. And I was proud of Hortense. There was nothing small and pitiful about her under his gaze. She was very gallant and steadfast.

He bowed to her. 'You will excuse us, Madame. I have business with your kinsman.' And he held the door for her to pass out.

But he still scowled as he watched her go. 'There is a law about that in your country, is there not?' he asked. 'A law that a man may not marry his deceased wife's sister?'

'Yes,' I said. 'There is such a law.'

He studied me, frowning. 'The law is operative out of England.'

I shook my head. 'No.'

He clicked his tongue. 'Well, to business.' He drew a chair forward, and sat down. He looked me over, and began to grin. 'I understand that you went home last night because you were ill. You had a peaceful night?'

I shrugged. 'Sieur de Langlade, why are you here? What do you want?'

He nodded. 'Good enough. I am for straight words myself. Le Claire, where did you spend the night?'

'Where did you spend your own night, Sieur?'

He threw out his hands. 'So you would still play a game. Childish! Well, have it. I spent the night watching you — at a distance. Did you think me asleep when you left? I followed.'

I looked at him more closely. He, too, was disheveled — though not as I. His clothes were rumpled; covered with bark, grass, leaves.

'You listened,' I said. 'Well?'

'Yes, it is well,' he rejoined soberly, 'and that seems due to you, spy and traitor that you are. Oh, come, come, I learned enough last night to know where to place you.' He looked at me. 'You did a good night's work.'

I shrugged, as I had at Hortense. 'Well?'

Langlade pondered. 'I don't quite know, Le Claire. I'm disposed to make terms with you. Whoever or whatever you are, you've a strong hold with the Menominees, and you saved us from attack last night. Why? Was it because you had eaten our bread?'

I lifted an eyebrow. 'If you like. That feeling binds even savages. Look here, Langlade, whatever you believe about me, take my oath for it, my sister-in-law is not involved.'

He studied me. 'You swear this?'

'Willingly. Yet why need I? You should be keen enough to see for yourself. Can't you feel she is French to the core? Whatever I have told you about her is absolutely true.'

He looked gratified. 'I belive you. And now about yourself.'

'I have no more to say than I have already told you, Sieur.'

'Which is all lies. Well, let it go, Le Claire: Le Corne wants you put under arrest.'

'Why?'

And now it was Langlade's turn to shrug. 'He calls you a suspicious character, but I think — Well, he has a long scratch on his cheek this morning.'

I nodded. 'Madame Rupert has quick hands. I don't wonder Le Corne does not care for the family. Where were your wits that you let her go without a proper guard, Monsieur?'

He looked ill at ease; ashamed. I felt that in this matter at least, we were in accord. 'Le Corne is my friend,' he parried. 'Yet, I do not know that I should arrest you on his account. You were of more service than he last night. Le Claire, can you keep the Menominees off the war-path?'

I flicked dust from my coat. 'I do not know.'

He stopped to light his pipe, which he had let die out. 'So you don't know, eh? Well, you've proved you'll try. I don't want revolt there now. I could crush it, but the influence would be bad. I don't want trouble while the Winnebagoes are here in camp. You know that as well as I, so why not talk squarely? That sort of unrest spreads. The Winnebagoes wouldn't join the Menominees; they'd fight with me. But I don't want them stirred. I want to get them on to Quebec. I'm being very frank.'

I bowed. 'You are. But as you said, Sieur, you are telling me nothing new.'

He snapped his thumbs. 'Naturally. Now it rests here. I save your life. You keep the Menominees quiet.'

'I have not power to make such a bargain, Sieur.'

He gave a dry cackle. 'The bargain you make is with yourself,' he said shrewdly. 'I need ask no promise; you will try your best. For the rest, I don't care what you do.'

No, why should he care. He could use me as guard as long as he needed, and kill me when I was not of service. I was between his thumb and forefinger. And he knew absolutely that I would save the settlement if possible. He seemed secure that I had power to accomplish it. I was less sure. Yes, he had me trapped. I looked at him, and admitted it.

He moved his shoulders. Something in my steady gaze made him restless. 'What are you thinking about?' he asked roughly. 'Speak it out, man.'

Well, I had nothing to gain or lose. 'Do you want the truth?' I said smoothly. 'I was thinking, Sieur, that report has it that after the battle against the English at Pickiwilliny, your followers boiled and ate the queen they called the Demoiselle. I wonder if I shall be found palatable when you finish with me and turn me over to your crew. I am somewhat lean and tough, Sieur!'

He cursed, and got heavily out of his chair. 'I should run you through for that,' he said thickly. Then, as he looked, something in my sorry plight seemed to get hold of him. 'My faith, you have

spirit!' he muttered. 'Go to bed,' he said aloud, and kindly: 'You've earned it. As for your tongue — don't bite at the bars of your cage, Le Claire. You're too clever for that.'

I nodded with a sorry grimace. He was right. He had the best of me at the moment both in temper and philosophy. 'You give me free rein in the settlement?'

'Free rein.'

'How long will Le Corne stay here?'

Langlade grinned. 'He was to stay some days, but I think he may take his scratched cheek away tomorrow. Stay under cover till he goes. Sleep, if you like. I'll see you're not molested.'

Strange! He was the man I had come to spy on and destroy. He was my captor, and in that my enemy. Yet he was offering me the boon of protected sleep — a large boon in the wilderness.

I agreed, for I was utterly spent. I stumbled as I tried to follow to the door. But a saving thought came before he crossed the threshold.

'My Indian, Amaiou. Any amnesty you give me must apply to him.'

Langlade hesitated. I saw I had spoken just in time. 'I cannot promise —'

I drew my sword. 'Then it is life for life. The day Amaiou dies, I make trouble. I promise you that.'

He snapped his thumbs, and considered my sword and me. 'You are a strange man. Well, put up your sword. Your Amaiou is safe.'

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

'Then both of our lives are safe until you give warning?'

He thought over the terms of the agreement. 'Yes,' he decided. 'That is fair. Yes, I will give you warning.'

I put up my sword. 'It is understood,' I agreed. 'As you suggest, I will rest. You need fear nothing from the Menominees to-day. They will be torpid as I. We were all rather extravagant of emotions last night.'

He looked at me oddly. 'Go to bed,' he advised again, and took himself out of the way.

I staggered back and flung myself down. But my last waking sensation was gruesomely diverting. 'So that story about their eating the Demoiselle was true, after all.'

CHAPTER XXV

DESTINY'S JEST

Amaiou woke me. He did it at a distance, with a stick, as one stirs a snake; not touching me, but poking at the blankets. He had found my manners abrupt when wakened. I threw up my head.

'Look!' he gutturaled. 'Le Corne.'

I was at the crack of the door at a bound, carrying the scattering fringes of a dream with me. Le Corne stood on the bank before my cabin, while a man below beached a canoe. Across in the Menominee camp a group of Indians were gesticulating.

'His coat! His coat!' Amaiou insisted behind me. 'Le Corne's coat!'

I looked. And I had to hunch my shoulders to smother a sudden guffaw. Le Corne's back was plastered like a painted canvas with a little of everything at hand in the Menominee camp. I detected fish scraps, fragments of birds' eggs, and an overlying pigment of grease and refuse. His white shirt-front was unspotted, so the attack had caught him from the rear. I made no doubt the Menominees were responsible. Le Corne's stare and their gesticulation completed the story.

The canoe beached, Le Corne turned and walked toward the Langlades', his profile undisturbed. I had to do the man tribute. With the scratch on his cheek, and the plaster on his back he was still high-

chinned, negligent. My yokel glee ebbed down into a grin of unwilling, and very momentary, liking.

For after all, the laugh, if laugh there were, was against me rather than Le Corne. If the Menominees were at this pass, what could I do with them? They had not slept the day, as I had guaranteed. Le Corne had disturbed them. Well, my sleep was over.

I looked at my watch — four o'clock. There was nothing for it but the Menominee camp. I brushed myself together, ate a handful of corn, and ferried across the river.

Cochon met me at the bank with his easy grin. All the camp had seen me, but he was the only one to come down and pull in the canoe. I thanked him, but gave him no beads or tobacco, and waited to see his chin drop. But it did not; the grin persisted. He seemed determined to be pleased with me.

The Indians grunted as I walked among them, but their look was noncommittal. I had not known in the least what to expect, hostility or admiration, and was equally prepared for a chief's robe or a rotten egg. But I could make nothing of their attitude. Some were gaming indifferently, some lounging, but none were working. However, there was no sign of war paint or drum.

I went on to Old King's tepee. He was crouched in the sunshine, mumbling at his pipe, and he nodded scantily as I sat beside him. A row of dried scalps fluttered above his head, dipping and bobbing in the breeze. I did not like them. They had not been there the day before, so, lazy as Old King seemed, he had taken the trouble to string them up in the hours

when I had promised he should be sleeping. I smoked a pipe-fill with my mind full of speculation, and my eyes on the stringing black locks. There was no European hair. Perhaps the omission irked Old King.

'Wild geese squawk for the pleasure of opening their mouths,' I said, when my pipe was well emptied. 'Why did your young men throw things at Le Corne, and scream at him afterward?'

It was the first remark between us, and Old King squirmed around toward me as if he had not seen me before. He gave a lazy smile of liking; almost a twinkle of confidence.

'Why did he come?' he asked. 'A mouse does not push his way into a snake's burrow. And it was the hour for sleep.' He rocked at the memory.

I scowled, and disdained imagery. 'So for a laugh you would have brought down the whole French army at your throats,' I growled.

Old King looked at me over his calumet. There was still liking in his glance, but calculation as well. He resumed his pipe.

'When a hunter gathers grass and leaves,' he puffed slowly, 'he makes a spark to kindle the fire he has laid.' And saying this, he ducked into his blanket, drawing it well over his head.

So I was left alone in the late summer afternoon, to be mocked by the curtseying scalp-locks, smell the decaying fish, and think my perturbed thoughts. For Old King was as well hidden as if in the snake's burrow he had mentioned. And there he would remain.

But he had given me data. I could not but see what the Indians meant by their noncommittal greeting. They had followed me once, and now waited passive on my next move. I had shaken my conjuror's bag and now they relied on me to untie it and produce another trick. In the meantime they would show their contempt of French authority by way of sauce to my game.

I got up heavily, and made my way back. A group of the younger women were playing at double ball, throwing a great sphere of deerhide covered with thongs. It fell near me, and I stopped and threw it back to them. A few of the men grunted at that, seeming pleased at my condescension. It was favorable that Cochon had been friendly; he was a serviceable weather vane.

I paddled back across the stream with no coherence in mind, and little purpose in spirit. For never had I been in harder case. Even the crisis of the night before had not been graver. Yet with all this responsibility upon me, I lost time by stopping to hate Le Corne. I hated him with every lift of my paddle, and I gave my mind to it. It was an empty and unsatisfying task, but occupying. If Le Corne had kept his place on his own side the river, nothing overt would have happened. It was his fault, his alone, that the torch was lighted. And he had had no purpose but idleness of spirit. It was unfair that he should have power to plunge us into this.

With the fall of dusk it had become suddenly warm, purplish clouds mounting in rolls up through the sunset. I called Amaiou to care for the canoe, and

went to the settlement. I went to have the matter out with Langlade. It was my only course. The air grew more and more sluggish, heat lightning playing across the west. The Langlade quarters were unlighted, the family crowding out over the sills on the little quay. My heart yearned toward them all. I looked at the Villeneuves' cabin, at the forge where a red coal showed Clermont was puffing an evening pipe. A gay people, kind, courageous. They had given me welcome and shelter. What was I bringing on them? Hortense's cabin was dark. Was she at the window?

The group in front of the Langlades' gave a murmuring welcome. Individuals were little more than shapes in the grayness, and for a moment I could not find Langlade. He had withdrawn under the window, and nodded at me shortly. Le Corne sat beside Agatha on a string piece of the jetty, and he was murmuring to her, his back to the company. A flare of lightning showed the girl in one of her shining moods, flashing, full of color. Le Corne's black man stood behind them, a knife in his turban. I smiled at that. Le Corne loved tableau.

Baby Catherine caught my coat as I passed, and swung herself to me. She twisted her small hands, wet with heat, into mine, and flopped her curls against me. The touch of her shocked me. She had trusted me always, would leave any one to come to me. I put her hands away.

And then I went to Langlade. A mutter of thunder gave me cover. I leaned over him. 'Your ear?'

He nodded, but spoke aloud and indifferently of

the heat and the coming storm. Then, as another thunder-roll gave opportunity, he sent a counter-whisper.

'Wait at the first warehouse.'

I went at once. It was a sickening place to wait. The air was foul from the hides and in this sultry gloom it tried a man's nerves and stomach. I made my stumbling way to a rough table that was Langlade's desk, and plumping myself down on his bench, laid my head in my hands. I was in darkness, but dancing scalp-locks made spots of color in front of my shut eyes.

The thunder barked sullenly, and my hands pricked with heat. What if Helen, who had been my wife, could see me now! What she had called my senselessness had irritated her out of all pleasure in life. Would she say I had justified her judgment, or would she, perhaps, understand at last? Well, I had left her boy well placed in a snug English background. Such part of him as was mine I had addressed in a long letter that lay at the bottom of Amaiou's powder horn. That was between us two. For the rest, with Helen as judge, I could say to her, 'The thing that you wished for your son I have given him in even too abundant measure.' I met Helen there in spirit, as I had often in the flesh, and in the dark and heat and stench we held accounting. That I might be the cause of death and torture to Helen's sister, I did not bring up even in thought. That was between Hortense and me.

Langlade came in heavily, plunging through the hot darkness.

'What of Le Corne?' I demanded.

Langlade stretched himself, puffing, on a pile of skins. They did not seem to offend him. He lighted his pipe.

'A devil's mess you've made,' he parried.

'I have,' I agreed, and wiped the sweat away. 'A devil's mess it is, and Le Corne has made it more. What's to be done?'

Langlade puffed. 'About what?'

I waited for a roll of thunder to pass by. 'We waste time,' I said; 'and I, Monsieur, have none to throw away. I warn you there is a row of scalp-locks on Old King's tepee. Must you retaliate about Le Corne?'

The skins creaked under Langlade's turnings. He swore softly and well. 'There would have been no scalp-locks on parade if you had kept away,' he grumbled.

I bowed. 'It would be foolish to deny that — and would consume time. I am here — also the scalp-locks. You are the greatest Indian leader in New France. What are we to do?'

Langlade puffed again. Speech was hard for him when it came to admitting another to his plans. He had the reticence of a savage, and the arrogant secretiveness of a natural leader. But he knew when he was beaten, and the situation had him by the throat.

'I have advised Le Corne to be off at sunrise,' he admitted.

'Then you will not bring up that matter with the Menominees? If you can do that, Langlade, you may save much blood.'

He clicked his tongue. 'I can do it. Le Corne I have managed to-day. He has agreed to go, and leave it with me. For Old King — I shall send a messenger to him with tobacco and a belt. I will tell him that his village is his to do with as he likes; this side of the river is mine. But what Old King does to my family when they are on his land, will I do to his when they come to mine.'

A weight shifted. I had a partner for the moment. That was more than something. If Langlade killed me on the morrow I had at least his brain to help me for this day.

The lightning, forcing through the cracks, played over his slouched figure. 'Hot!' he grunted. Then he made the counter-charge. 'Now, what will you do?'

'In regard to what, exactly?'

He removed his pipe to talk. He could be fluent enough when it came to discussion of another's plans. 'It stands so,' he began. 'You came here a spy. You ate my food. You took my shelter. You worked upon the Indians and filled them with massacre. They are idle, and too well fed, and you have them restless till they want to kill. You wish that?'

Too straight talk. I had to let it go, and I did not answer.

So he repeated. 'Answer! You wish that?'

'No.'

'I believe you, as I said this morning. But this morning I thought you could hold the Indians. Now I don't know. What do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'You have some plan. What is it?'

'There seems but one solution,' I answered slowly. 'And I like it little.'

The lightning showed Langlade peering upward. 'Speak out,' he growled. 'And if you do not tell the truth, remember I have means to prove you.'

I laughed a little. 'That is stupid, Langlade. Save threats for one who has more to lose than I. Briefly, the only plan I have is that I shall go away.'

Again the lightning flared. Langlade's lip was lifting. 'A plan I should not allow,' he said smoothly.

'I think you will. I must produce something new to satisfy these savages. Else they will get beyond me. I must whet their curiosity, hold them from day to day. Every hour I can keep them quiet will be gain. If I can hold them from outbreak for a week or two, and you can make them particularly comfortable by drawing on the Company's stores, their old apathy will return. This is true?'

'Probably.'

'Then I see but one card left. To tell them I am going to their old allies the Foxes. I think Old King will promise not to move till I come back with reinforcements.'

Langlade laughed. An eerie sound, for it caught and mounted in the roll of the thunder till it filled the room with threatening echoes. 'That is a bold proposition for you to make to me.'

I rose. 'It is, Monsieur. It is a bold proposition. But it is nothing but words, and I make it not to you, but to Old King. It will hold him, I think. Show me another plan that will.'

Langlade, too, rose. The movement of our bodies stirred the heavy, fetid air till I tried not to breathe. To open one's nostrils was to admit a thing too foul. The mutter of thunder and flare of lightning was almost continuous now. Yet no rain had fallen. The tension of the heat, noise, and odor made Langlade's deliberation almost monstrous. And he waited quite a time before he spoke. Then he laughed — not pleasantly.

'I think I accept your plan; I'll send you word in the morning. Come! I must out of this. I do not care to have it known I have been with you. Don't follow me too closely.' And he lunged off without good-bye. I had proffered my death warrant, and been accepted.

I followed him at an interval, walking craftily, and fancying myself unseen. But just as I was passing the Langlades' house, the old mother appeared at the door. Her Indian ear had caught my step.

'How is the woman — Madame Rupert?' she said, and there was great interest and kindness in her tone.

My heart leaped to her. 'I do not know,' I said ruefully. 'I have not seen her this evening.'

She made a clucking sound, very like the one her son was fond of using. 'Too bad. Poor little one,' she said in the Indian croon, as soft a mother-note as I know. 'Take care of her. Poor little one.'

I went on, with tears stinging my lids. I was accustomed to think of Hortense as courageous, almost unbreakable. Now this Indian's voice had made her seem a thing of almost vanishing gentleness. I

saw her as a girl; a thing of curls and sunshine. 'Take care of her!' I ground my fingers till the knuckles cracked at the irony of the plea.

I stumbled to my cabin, but did not enter. Instead I propped myself against the river-bank, across from the Menominee camp. I must sleep in the open that night so that I could rouse at any activity on the opposite shore. I squared my shoulders into the dirt, pulled down my hat to shut out the lightning, and, having just signed away my life to Langlade, went fast asleep. It was no stoicism; it was the end of thought. I was beyond worry.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SNAKE

I AWOKE, cramped and aching, into a dull morning. The departure of Le Corne's bateaux waked me; the splash of the paddles as the canoes worked upstream. The Indians were heavy-lidded, their wits scarce astir, and no one saw me. I watched the boats wryly. I would have liked a personal meeting with Le Corne.

The day was sulky and sultry; no rain. With all the display of the night before the storm had moved away, leaving a lifeless sky and stifling air. The birches drooped, the aspens showed the whites of their leaves. Also, the Menominee camp looked quiet. I could see a pack of limp dogs trailing along the bank, but the Indians were back in their tepees.

I wanted creature comforts. I climbed the bank to Amaiou, and asked for food and hot water. I was in mood for a toilette.

I had scarcely finished breakfast — and the wild-rice cakes and broiled white fish justified my lingering — when a high, raw scream brought my heart to my mouth, and my feet plunging to the door.

Scream followed scream, though with lessening breath power. I flung out of doors and looked around. Suzanne was running toward me, her mouth gaping, her feet stumbling, her tattered gray hair flying about a face of putty.

I caught her last stumble in my arm. I think I shook her. 'Your mistress!'

She righted herself admirably, got her mouth together, and pushed me from her. 'Run!' she cried. 'The snake.'

I was slow, slow in getting to Hortense's cottage. It was a nightmare run. With all my pushing, my legs moved at a crawl.

I pushed open her door, calling her name. Others had heard, and ran behind me. I could hear their feet. But I was there first. 'Hortense! Hortense!' I was crying.

Hortense stood in her sitting-room, holding herself upright by grasping the table. Her face was old. She looked as she might at fifty. On the floor before her lay a large, dead rattlesnake. She had killed it, as I saw shudderingly, with anything and everything at hand; poker, books, chair. It was a sickening, an indescribable débris in a place that had always seemed exquisite and perfumed.

I caught it at a glance, then was at Hortense's side. I did nothing but say her name again, and she looked at me lifelessly, not answering. A group pushed in behind me, Madame Villeneuve, the Jourdains, Agatha — Langlade in the lead. He was at Hortense in a bound, and took her hand.

'What does it mean?' he demanded.

She looked at him coldly. 'The snake,' she said in a dead voice. 'It was there, just there. It sprang at Suzanne. It missed her, but its fangs caught my dress. I killed it.'

She pulled away from Langlade, and walked to the window, turning her back to us all.

There was a moment's awkwardness. Then a chorus of protest and advice. Langlade looked at the snake, and chewed his lip. I followed Hortense.

'Will you do as I ask?'

'Yes,' she said, but she did not turn.

Then I went back to Langlade. 'Monsieur, I am going to take my kinswoman to my house, and leave some one to clear up the mess here.'

Langlade shrugged. 'It is your matter.' He looked at the unresponsive back at the window. 'Let us get out of this,' he said and led the group away. He was gruff, but he acted quickly. I seldom parted from Langlade, even when in anger, without admiration.

I followed Agatha, and called her aside. 'Will you take Suzanne? Make her comfortable. You know so well how.'

Then I went back to Hortense. She was still at the window, heavy and lifeless — a leaden woman, dull and gray.

'Now,' I said, 'Hortense, you are coming with me, but not through this room. Jump out this window. I'll catch you.'

She did not even glance at me, but she assented. 'Very well.' A shiver ran through her, the first emotion she had shown.

I went through the room hastily, catching her shawl as I ran. Then I was outside the window, and held up my arms. It was simply done. Hortense was light as a cat, and in a second was on the ground beside me.

I wrapped the shawl around her. The morning was

still sultry, but I could feel her shaking. I started to take her straight to my cabin, but I saw her feet cringe from the ground as she tried to step into the grass, so I changed my route, and led her by the beaten path of the river-bank.

Amaiou was at our door, watchful and noncommittal. I led Hortense inside. 'Now, Amaiou will take all the blankets and robes outside, and shake them,' I told her. 'You are to sit in a chair and watch.'

I placed her, still dumb, in a chair in the corner, and began a thorough turning over of the room, opening every bag and box, and showing them to her so she could be sure no snake or rodent was hidden. I even had her look at the under part of the couch. Then I brought in blankets, and made the bed freshly.

'Lie down,' I pleaded, and went and knelt before her, taking one of her cold, shaking hands.

She had not spoken all this while. Now she tried, but her lips betrayed her so she could only nod. I picked her up, carried her to the couch, and covered her snugly.

'It is the fourth snake in three weeks,' she said as she dropped her head on the rough pillow, and her voice was dead, her eyes glassy. 'They have beaten me. I cannot stand it. I shall go mad with fear. It is better to kill myself than lose my mind.'

The chill that was shaking her ran through me. 'The fourth in three weeks!' And that did not count the one I had seen!

'Forget them.' I pulled the blanket higher in spite of the heat. 'I promise you'll neither go mad

nor see more snakes. And if you will be good, and cry, Amaiou shall bring you broth.'

She turned her head to me. Her eyes seemed varnished, hard and bright. 'Some one puts the snakes there,' she said monotonously. 'I look every night. I looked last night. And I shut the door. And in the morning they are there. Only, the other times they crawled away. I shall go mad.'

Her light curls were matted on her forehead. I brushed them away. Then I took her hand, and laid it against my cheek as she had once done with mine. 'I promise — and I can make my words good — that I can stop this. Forget it. Be good, dear one, and never mention this again.'

It was the first endearment, word or deed, I had given her. It served its purpose for it reached her consciousness. She looked at me with eyes that lost something of their stare. Then she closed them. 'Very well,' she murmured. I saw moisture on her lashes.

I watched a moment, but she lay still, so I tiptoed to our outside fire and brought in a cup of the hot meat broth Amaiou had brewed. I stopped to compliment him on having secured the side of a deer. It had been days since we had had time for hunting, so I suspected my supply of beads was growing lighter.

I held the broth to Hortense's lips, and she drank like a child. 'I must get up now,' she said. 'I must find Suzanne.'

I pushed her back. 'Suzanne is with Agatha. You are to lie here. Can you think pleasant thoughts? Try.'

She really smiled. 'But ought I to be here?'

I was puzzled for a moment. 'Oh, you mean convention?'

She nodded. 'You suggested it before.'

Somehow I ground my teeth. 'I have business to keep me out all day,' I said surlily. 'Besides, Hortense, conventions come from conditions. And if I cannot give you this roof-shelter in the wilderness without comment, why, life is a poor thing. I'll leave you now. Amaiou will be within call.'

She settled back on the blanket roll that I had placed for pillow. Her face still shocked me. But she tried another smile. 'Oh, brother John, you know so many things.'

I hesitated. As well now as ever; I stood over the couch and looked down. 'No, not "brother John,"' I said slowly. 'You are but half-sister of my former wife, and I never saw or knew you as part of the family. You may hold that in mind, Hortense, if you will. I am not "brother John."'

I set my jaw hard for her answer, which might hurt, but which had better come. But she said nothing. She turned away, and the tears that I had been hoping for came. She hid her face, but I saw she was crying — crying easily like a tired child. I took a large and reasonably white handkerchief from my small store, and tucked it in her hand. 'Do that till you're tired,' I admonished in a school-master tone, 'then go to sleep.'

At the door she called me, 'John!'

I came back slowly. I wanted to go just then and there.

'Will you close the door when you go, John — and the window?'

I laughed. My intensity vanished. 'Poor little girl! Do you see troops of snakes over the sill? But there, we were never to speak of them again. No, you must have the door open. It's stifling here. But Amaiou shall sit on the door-stone. He'll not move.'

And on the door-stone I placed Amaiou, and went my way.

I went to the Langlade quarters, and satisfied their inquiries. Suzanne was sitting in the big room, the Langlade baby in her arms, and was supervising Agatha's knitting stitches. She jumped at sight of me, but calmed easily. She was old and tired enough to be soothed by her sudden importance.

I bent to Agatha's ear. 'Competent and kind! Thank you.'

She shook her head, her eyes twinkling. She was conquering, radiant. 'I owed you something for the dress,' she flung at me. 'It did its work.'

I looked the house over, but did not find what I wanted, so was forced to whisper to Agatha again. 'Where is Ahnawa?'

'Outside, washing.'

'Is she mine for the day?'

The girl again cocked a squirrel eye. 'She is. And peace to what you do to her.'

I found Ahnawa alone outside, stirring the great washing caldron. I stood in front of her in so hot a rage that my tongue was thick. 'Come with me.' I got the words out indistinctly, and woman as she was, I could have cuffed and kicked her on the way.

She followed me, Indian-wise, and I saw over my shoulder that she stepped lightly, with her head high.

I led the way to Hortense's cabin, and pushed her inside. Then I gave her a moment to look around. She did it insolently, still disdainful. The dismembered snake seemed to give her pleasure. I let her look her full, the while I watched. Well, she had spirit. It remained to be seen whether I could break that will.

'You like it,' I said at last. 'You should. It is your work. Come, no words. This is what I have to say. What you do to Madame Rupert, I do to your son Nicholas. If another snake is found here — however it comes — a snake shall be in your son's bed. You understand?'

The bolt caught her. I saw her face blacken; then she threw up her head and began to defy.

But I clapped my hand across her mouth, and I did it roughly. 'No words,' I reiterated. 'What I say, I do. You understand.'

And then I watched her will crumple, and was too hot with rage to think it pitiful. I had been apprehensive of the result; perhaps her contempt of torture would extend to Nicholas. But it did not. She nodded at last.

'Then clear this room,' I ordered. 'Get hot water and lye and scrub it thoroughly. I will oversee what you do.' And I left her with the débris.

Each time I stepped outdoors my eyes went to the Menominee camp. It was still quiet, so I went to my cabin where Amaiou signaled that my guest was asleep. I tiptoed back of the house, and found my-

self some food, then banked the outside fire that the broth could be warmed quickly when Hortense waked. That done, I went in search of Langlade's mother.

I knew where to find her. She spent hours withdrawn from the family in a small lean-to room tucked on the Langlades' main building. There, with her Pawnee slave, she crouched over her basket-making, working her story in reeds and willows.

She signed me to come in, and took her pipe as she listened. I told her what I had done to Ahnawa, what I had threatened.

'But I may die or leave,' I concluded. 'Then Ahnawa can have her revenge. May I leave my sister-in-law with you? You, who have borne many children, called Madame Rupert "child." Have you room to hide her in your great heart? May I tell Ahnawa that Madame Rupert is as your own flesh?'

The old woman wiped her eyes. Squaws cry easily if it is a matter of children or adoption. But she nodded to all I asked, and I went away, my heart lightened. She might be moved to facile tears, but her word was iron.

So I returned to Ahnawa. However reluctant her spirit, her hands had the fear of me behind them, and she had made a good beginning. But that was not enough. I wanted the shining perfecton of a ship's deck, and I got it. I stood behind the girl, with Madame Langlade's authority, and my own rage, and she worked like a convict at the rope's end. Sweat dripped from her face and fingers, but I did not care. I was not only angry; I was the arrogant mas-

ter, dealing with a dependent race. I had schooled myself to be almost Gallic with the Indians; now I reverted to type. And by early afternoon, every room in the cabin shone like a new-washed baby.

I let Ahnawa go with a bit of advice. 'I have treated you harshly. But I have but begun to do what is in my heart. Remember that.'

She went, but her head was not bent. I had my tiger caged, and the bars were sound, but I was not deceived as to any taming being accomplished.

Then I went to fetch Suzanne, and ask a favor of Agatha.

Suzanne trembled as I brought her back. But her spirit was gallant, and when I told her she was needed at home she let me lead her.

I showed her the clean threshold. 'You see there is nothing to fear.' But still she cowered. Her eyes were strained, every step furtive. I could not have Hortense find her that way. I had to play my trump.

'Susan, won't you trust one of your own people?' I spoke in English.

The old woman paled and staggered. It seemed for a moment I might have murder on my hands. Then her color returned, and some new birth with it. She took me by the shoulders, peering into my eyes. She felt of me as if she were blind, and I a manikin. Then she dropped on her knees and began to pray. It was a prayer of trust and thanksgiving, addressed to an English God, and done with a Devon accent that swept in my blood like a song.

And then she stood up and blessed me in a mixture

of the King James version and peasant aphorisms. I stood helpless before her, my eyes not clear.

But this would not do. 'Do you know who I am?' I asked, and told her some part of it. She listened, bewildered, comprehending little except the fact of my blessed nationality. I had seemed familiar to her but she had not linked me with the portrait, probably because she had been too numbed by loneliness and fright to look at me squarely. Now I belonged, and she became feudal, dependable. If I had told her to use snakes as bed-fellows, she would have done it as a rite.

I set her to baking. 'For a company to-night,' I admitted.

On that, I looked again to see the Menominees were quiet, then went on business of my own back toward the timber. I knew a clear stretch of meadow not a half mile distant where there were wild roses and early clusters of the brown and yellow flowers that children call Black-eyed Susans. Agathas, instead of Susans, they seemed, as they perked up at me from their sturdy stalks, and laughed even as I picked them.

I filled my arms with ferns and flowers, crowded my hat with roses, and came back decked like Bottom in Mr. Shakespeare's comedy.

And then I set to placing them in Hortense's room. I had great, quiet pleasure in this simple service. To build a house for the woman; that is one of the compensations of the wilderness. This I had been denied. But the moment I did have I would enjoy, and the room was a shimmer of leaves, flowers, and perfume

when I finished. I looked at the disarray of maps on the table, and tried to smile, but my lips twisted. I made a pile of the papers, and gave them to Suzanne to put away.

Back to my cabin then — but with misgivings. What had the day done for Hortense?

I found her on the door-stone, her hands in her lap, her eyes on the west. The long, dull, sultry day was clearing to a lightening sunset. A breeze whispered down the river. She did not speak as I came up, but smiled and made room, leaving the initiative to me. And I sat beside her with no words. As I took off my hat to cool my hair, I saw my fingers shaking. She saw it too.

'How very tired you are,' she cried, her voice unsteady.

'No, no,' I said, 'not tired. It is reaction. You frightened me this morning. I was not sure that you could be so well to-night. You slept?'

'For hours.'

'Then I'll take you home. Wait — it's all right. Here is the truth, briefly, Hortense. The snakes were put there by Ahnawa. I've told her that if another is found near you, Nicholas shall be tortured. You are safer now than any one in the settlement. There'll be no snakes at your cabin, if Ahnawa has to crawl of nights to keep them away. The place has been put in order. Come!'

But she did not rise. 'Ahnawa,' she pondered. 'How could she!' The old bleakness came to her tone.

'She is a savage,' I reminded.

I could see her going over the past. 'And much ill-used,' she concluded. She rose with a sudden aloof spring. 'It is buried.' She stood with her face to the west, her profile clean-cut as a birch tree against the evening. Then she leaned forward, touching my shoulder with her finger-tips. 'John,' she said, 'how did you know I had to see the inside of everything this morning?'

Her face, so near, mocked me. I felt old. 'Nonsense,' I said; 'I hate the things myself! Come, let us go.' And that time she came with me through the grass, careless of her footsteps.

I handed her to Suzanne, but did not enter. 'Wear your freshest gown to-night,' I said as I left her. 'I asked Agatha to tell every one that to-night you were to have a party.'

I left in no holiday mood, and hurried to the Menominee camp. But I found the Indians in an uproar of amusement over a bear cub which they had on a stump, and were tormenting. They were betting on the number of scratches the cub would give the dogs, and had only good-humored indifference for me. However, I delayed. I chaffered and jested with them till the stars were long out. As I ferried back across the stream, I heard music at Hortense's cabin, and her lights were flaring. Agatha's plans seemed to carry well.

I freshened myself, but made scant toilette. Outside bravery at the moment sickened me. Then I went to Hortense's cabin; in the crowd I slipped in without comment.

The picture was daintily gay. I do not know what

charm in the wilderness adds witchery and lightness to human contact, but so I have often found it. Ferns and flowers threw patterned shadows in the torchlight; the violin was whispering, and though no one was dancing, for the floor was small, there was much talk and laughter. Hortense wore her soft white gown with a cluster of the roses I had brought.

And if the room were gay, Hortense was almost carnival. It had seemed best to have people and music in the room that evening to change her thought, erase the memories of the morning. But I was not prepared to see how the wine of relief mounted. Her voice was a trill, her eyes shining. She looked as she had when I had danced with her, and the moon lay white outside. Coutrol was fetching for her like a bewildered spaniel, and Langlade was watchful. I went to him.

'You sent no word to-day, Monsieur — about my trip to the Foxes.'

'No; I have been thinking.' An oath puffed his lips. 'Get away when you like,' he exploded. 'How soon do you go?'

'In some days,' I returned. 'A few plans first.'

He shrugged and twisted. 'Let me know when you leave.'

Hortense came up; she pointed to her flowers, and whispered, 'Thank you.' She did it in English, which was daring.

I looked at the stars in her eyes. 'I came but to say good-night,' I said. And while some one called her name I slipped away. I looked back through the window at the gathering. Kind and gay, and so far

as I had seen them, honorable. I would leave her in good hands. And she was wonderfully resilient herself; the day had proved that. She would go on and fill her life abundantly.

But as I turned on my bed for hours, I could hear the violin calling me.

CHAPTER XXVII

BEQUESTS

I WAS at my desk all the next morning. My fingers were stiff to a quill, and I pushed them till I was ink spattered. I covered many sheets of paper and was rid of much inside that plagued me. There is no better way to clean the thought than to soil white paper with one's perplexity.

At noon I looked out the door. For that day I had no fear of the Menominees. I had been there early and made them a proposition. They were in a lax mood, ready to wait my new plans.

So I went to Hortense. As I went, I said: 'God never made another day as fair.' But I have said that often.

Hortense had out her lists of Indian verbs, and was sitting over them with a great show of industry. 'You deserted me last night,' she arraigned, but she took my hat from my hand and brushed at its frayed feather.

I put her by with a word, and told her to have Suzanne prepare a packet of food, as we would spend the afternoon on the river; that I was in mood for idleness, and that the day was fine. Her eyes grew darker blue at that, and she worked so quickly that we had few more words till we were afloat. She stepped in the canoe craftily, and I gave her the lunch to hold while I took paddle, and headed up the stream.

Midday lay on the water, and the river ran silver. The banks dripped green, and skimming swallows drew forked lines across the way. A fairy breeze was abroad, stirring the rushes; just a frolic thing to cool the cheek. And the sky was blue — burnished as a Chinese bowl.

Hortense sat primly, for I had praised her balance, but she sang softly; a song without words, as the birds hummed on the banks beside us. A butterfly poised on her shoulder, then brushed my cheek; it was as if the girl's own hand had touched me. I stopped at a bend where the stream made a backwater, and pulled a water-lily; Hortense sat with it in her hand, and I thought how I would like a painting of her just as she looked, that I might hang it in a room I knew.

We did not go far. I paddled a scant half-hour, then drew up to a glassy intervale where there was turf and scattered beech trees. A doe had brought her fawns to the water, and flung her heels wrathfully at our approach. I beached the canoe, and taking blankets, spread them in a flower-rimmed hollow where a beech gave dappled shade. Then Hortense and I sat down together.

We had hours of talk — though, indeed, I did the most of it. We did not begin for a time, for the warm gentleness of the day and the beauty of life sat strong on us. But I could not waste hours, even in delight, when I had so few. So I plunged in. I told Hortense that I would be leaving her almost at once, that I was going west to the Fox nation to be away some time.

I did not dare watch her face as I talked, though I longed to see it. And I plunged on too breathlessly to give her place to reply. For I was talking to a woman who might wear my roses, and be afraid of snakes, but who made war maps, studied Indian verbs, and understood the significance of war wampum. I was afraid of her deductions.

She did not interrupt. She waited till I stopped of my own accord, and said, 'Well?'

Even then she paused. 'And Langlade lets you go. Why?'

'Why not? He thinks me a trader — with credentials.'

She drew the long thick stem of the water-lily through her fingers. 'I think he knows you are an English spy,' she said evenly. 'An English spy with singular influence with the Menominees. Why does he let you go?'

I talked blindly and in the air. I could not understand, knowing the situation as she did, why she did not see that Langlade must intend to have me killed before I was many days' march away. To get rid of me, and keep the Menominees quiet at one blow — that was a great coup for him. That he seemed reluctant to accept the solution of his troubles at price of my murder did him credit. I talked ramblingly to keep Hortense from putting all this together. And I seemed to succeed. But with all my relief at being able to hoodwink her I marveled at the dullness of women in politics — even while I blessed it.

'I wonder,' she said at last — 'I wonder, John, if you would tell me why you are going west. It is not

for trade. Tell me what you expect to gain by going to the Foxes.'

I could not tell her. To confess that I was going to save the settlement from massacre was out of the question. But to let her think that I was going for my own interests was hard; when I am suffering my face has a foolish trick of going white. It must have done so then.

She looked at me quickly. 'Oh,' she said, 'so you can't tell me!'

'No.'

'Then I do not want to know,' she said, as a grand dame might dismiss a teasing child. 'Furthermore, I am not interested. John, shall we eat?'

The next hour was so gay and sweet and evanescent that I cannot hold it in words. One could as well catch a soap bubble's sheen. We played with phrases as birds play with song trills, with laughter running through. Then I took pipe from my pouch and paper from my pocket. 'We must come to business; will you read these while I smoke?'

There were three papers, all short. The first was a letter to Mr. Claxton, asking that it be arranged, in event of my death, that my sister-in-law, Hortense Godefroy, should be joint legatee to my property with my son. The second was a will, drawn with no legal knowledge, but covering the same matter. The third was a brief note to my boy, asking him to take Hortense as guardian and advisor, counseling him to be bound by her will till he should be of age.

It took but a moment for her to go through them. I did not watch her as she read. When finished, she

leaned toward me, and slipped her hand in mine. We sat for a moment, palm to palm.

'So you do not expect to come back alive?' she whispered.

'I certainly don't expect to come back dead,' I laughed. 'Once at rest I'll be a tired ghost, and not disturb you. No, no, you mustn't be fanciful. This is but a form; a precaution. Life being — well, surprising.'

She passed my lightness with a grave smiling, and seemed content to think before she said more. I watched her, and drifted into an almost happy maze.

'What do you want for your boy?' she asked at length.

And then I did sober. I lay down on the blanket, and pulled my hat low. 'I've not been at ease of late, Hortense, for thinking of Stuart. I left him in a snug, matter-of-fact, material background. He'll have great comfort — he'll be raised with great common sense — and not troubled with ideals. That seemed best for him — in view of his probable temperament. But of late I've been restless under what I've done. After all, he's my son. He may develop — differently — at any time. If you can reach him — and show him a little of the spirit you live by — I can go my way with better heart.'

She drew in her breath. 'I'll do my best. But the money — it embarrasses. Is it necessary?'

'No,' I said. 'Certainly not. You can refuse it, or give it away. I've never found it very useful stuff — beyond a certain small margin.'

That touched a memory we shared; yet never

mentioned. I saw her start to stretch her hand to mine again, then draw it back. We sat so still a squirrel came to the blanket edge and scolded.

And suddenly Hortense laughed. She stretched an arm into the warm sunshine like one returned to consciousness. 'But after all, you're not going to be killed,' she said, and there was a sudden break of joy in her speech. 'You're going back to England to grow fat and settled and fussy about your meals. I see you, John.'

I wished I might have laughed with her, but I was going through one of my inner agonies of revolt, and could only clench my teeth on the stem of my unlighted pipe. I searched in an inner pocket, and found the ring, the ring Hortense had returned to me. I handed it to her.

'Will you take it?'

'Another gift. Why, John?'

I turned from her eyes. 'We're a line of dreamers. I am — my father was — his father before him. The ring — the inscription — held us; a sort of family promise; a pledge of the house. A strange race we've been; not given to happiness; a little awry. But such as we are, we are, and the ring — means something to me. I wish you would take it, Hortense.'

'Shall I give it to Stuart?'

'It's yours. Give it where you will. But not to the boy till he proves himself. Till he attempts something — not for his own gain. But I give the ring to you — not to him; it is a wish of mine.'

Her color rose, but she slipped the ring on her finger. 'It is loose, John.'

'You mustn't wear it,' I cautioned. 'The English inscription wouldn't do.' And I lighted my pipe and walked away, making excuse to see that the canoe was fastened. I was at war with myself.

And because I was at war, the day which had gone so well ended badly. We let the hours drift, and I talked more freely than I supposed I knew how. But as the day waned I grew rebellious. Why had there been so few such days in my life that was about to end?

We ate again, finishing Suzanne's cakes and the jerked venison, and watching the fireflies show among the grass stalks. We planned to float back when the stars were out, so as to hear the whippoorwills on the river. Hortense took the ring and played with it on her finger, musing and smiling over the lettering inside.

'Which finger of yours does it fit, John?' she asked, and leaned to where my hand lay limp on my knee.

Her fingers, smooth-skinned and cool with twilight, touched mine. I had been stamping out lighted fuses all day. Now I seized her hand and crushed it. Then I dropped it. 'Don't! Don't!' I said like a fool, through my teeth, and got up and stormed down to the river.

And then I stood and looked at the fireflies, and watched a fish splash, and cursed myself, and cursed yet more. There was but one thing to do — to go back and lay myself, and whatever I stood for, at her feet. And that I could not. For Godefroy stood between. I was probably again a fool, but I was squeamish. She might not have been his wife in law,

but she had been in fact, and he was alive and she did not know it. He might be watching us at the moment. I had thought once that afternoon there was a head in the bushes. If she knew he was living, and so could judge her situation, I would have played the coward and asked for some mercy for myself to help me through. But she did not know. There were times when I forgot Godefroy. But he always came back.

I dragged back to where Hortense was sitting. 'Shall we go?' I asked lifelessly.

She rose at once from where she sat — waiting. I folded the blankets without a word, and still she watched. Then I led the way to the canoe.

And the trip back through the whispering reeds and the starlight was made in silence. It was swiftly done, the stream with us. But there was time for me to see Hortense watch me in perplexity, and feel her growing estrangement. And I could find nothing to say. I had already said too much or too little. A wiser man would have found a way out, but I was too little sure of my control to venture it.

As we disembarked we spoke of the beauty of the night and the passage. Then we walked to her door. There she looked at me fully, and held out her hand. And though she looked newly dignified, more like the Madame Rupert of old, she did not look unkind.

'Good-night,' she said.

'Good-night,' I returned, and bending to her hand, let my lips touch the smooth skin. She had not said, 'Good-night, John.' Her frequent use of my

Christian name had been one of the pleasures of the day.

Well, it would soon be over — the tumult, the desire, the questioning. It was a matter of a few more sunsets now. I strained ears and eyes to the Menominee camp. No noise or fire-shine there. Peace on both sides the water. I found myself smiling. I was paying a large price, but I saw a large reward.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEST-LAID PLANS

The next day I was Indian. I was in the Menominee village as soon as they were well astir, doing the mountebank and intriguer. It was a tedious day, and since my afternoon with Hortense had not been of the kind that leads to sleep, I felt I was doing it tediously. But for hours I danced my tight-rope, and tossed my shuttlecock of words. It was not enough to get the promise of Old King. It would be unwise to leave till I had the younger blood with me, and so I jested, smoked pipes, and tried at games of skill. I breathed better that I saw nothing of the red hatchet, or the purple and black war wampum.

And by night I was mildly triumphant. I had cajoled the young braves into considerable interest in my alleged plan to secure the allegiance of the Foxes, and Mickinac, the young chief who had opposed me in the war dance, had agreed to go with me. That clenched my decision to be off at once. He was the stormiest factor in the village; taking him was like robbing the Menominees' gunpowder. I had a moment's compunction about risking his neck with my doomed one, but put that by. Langlade would not kill a Menominee if he could avoid it. And Mickinac was so determined to push his way into some folly, that it was not for me to feel responsible for the route.

I had thought to take Cochon as messenger to send back to Hortense. But I decided not. He seemed sluggish and would be of little use. Also he would be in real danger; Langlade would have no inclination to spare a wandering Miami's head.

It was twilight when we squatted together and circled the pipe in token of our new agreement. I told Mickinac to take any two men he wished, and be ready to start with me by the second morning. Then I went back to what I had learned to call home.

My next move was to Godefroy, and as soon as it was dark I fired the shots we had agreed upon as signal.

As I went toward the Manitou I passed Hortense's house; it was unlighted. I had had no news of her all day. To be sure there had been a plate of muffins at my door but I knew them to be a race offering from Suzanne.

Just beyond Hortense's cabin I heard Godefroy's low call. I stepped back in the timber, and found him in the dusk. As I took his hand the touch of his palm reminded me of my first impression of him; the long elegance and finish of his body.

We exchanged brief greetings. 'You have kept me without news, and there has been much happening,' he complained, in the clipped voice that brought back to me what the dark withheld.

'I've much to tell. Where shall we talk?'

He led me a few paces back, indicating a bed of leaves near a fallen tree. He offered light for my pipe, but I declined, knowing he disliked even the flare of ash-glow from the bowl.

'To begin with, there is Ahnawa,' I said, and plunged without mercy into the story of the snake.

He flinched as he listened; yet at the end he met it coldly. 'You did well,' he said briefly. 'That is finished.'

I was irritated. 'This thing is finished, yes. But Ahnawa has resources. We must get her away.'

His voice became mocking. 'Granted. But how?'

There was a way. I had turned it over and over. When alone in the night it seemed feasible. Now I was less sure. But I would put it to the touch.

And so I asked him, as gently as I knew how, if it might not be possible for him to make himself known to Ahnawa, and taking Nicholas, go away with her again. I winced at doing this, and got it over swiftly, hating my words. But I had convinced myself that I was suggesting nothing unwarrantable. The child, I felt, would accept him, as children do all phenomena, after the first shock. Of Ahnawa, I was not so sure — but he could try. Nothing could be worse than things as they were. I dwelt much in my talk upon Nicholas; his beauty, his need of a European hand.

Godefroy heard me with patience. 'I will think of it,' he said in his detached monotone, so that I thought the idea was not new to him. 'But not now.' A shiver caught him. 'Don't push it, Sargent.'

I settled to talk of the Menominees, to the story of the night when we had been near an uprising, to Le Corne's visit, and what it had brought. Then I told him of my trip west.

That caught him. 'For God's sake, why?'

'I can't hold the Menominees, Godefroy,' I confessed, and went over my arguments. 'I've lighted a fire I can't control. In this way — especially now that Mickinac is going with me — I can tease them along. They'll get apathetic after a little; then it's Langlade's turn.'

'You plan to bring Fox warriors back with you!'

'Pouf, Godefroy! Would Langlade let me do that? No, he'll have to get rid of me. It's his only course. I suppose, in his place, I should do the same. And I have to appear not to understand his plans. It irks me sometimes to have Langlade think I'm deceived.'

He stirred in the dark. 'Don't do it!'

'And have blood and massacre here? Nonsense, Godefroy, I tell you the matter's serious.'

'But to go like an ox to the butcher!'

I was touched at his protest. 'I made a criminal mistake,' I said slowly. 'That I made it by stupidity, and not design, does not change it — it is criminal. With my eyes fixed on world dominion, I stirred these Indians against the kindest, gayest people I have ever known. If I can cover what I have done with the loss of only one life, and that my own, I'm fortunate.'

It was so much the truth he could say nothing. He thought awhile. 'Take me with you.'

He voiced an idea I was having hard work to strangle. Many men have gone to their execution with heads and hearts high. But they have known time and place when the blow was to fall. To have Godefroy with me would not change the manner of my end, but would help me meet it with a better pulse.

'But it can't be,' I said and bit off a groan.

'You don't want me?'

'Hideously. But you are of real use here. Then if the Indians with me saw you — and they would — you couldn't have that, Godefroy.'

The man had been lifted out of himself till he had forgotten. I had brought him back roughly — though without intent. But it had done him good, for he swore passionately. He had learned emotion again since I knew him. That was more than something.

'You leave soon?'

'In another day. If Amaiou, my Indian, tries to get away, help him, will you, Godefroy?'

'You care for him?'

'I do. Also, he carries letters.'

'He carries letters? You ask me to help. You, an English spy, Sargent.'

It sounded prattle. With death ahead I had other visions. 'Stuff!' I ejaculated. 'What are my letters! Would England send an army into this wilderness on the vaporings of one man? The letters, if it interests you to know, are largely about Hortense. English! I would not bring another of my nation here even if I could.'

He stood up. 'What! You've become French!'

'French! English! Words! Puppets!' I jeered. 'No more, Godefroy. I must go.' I, too, stood up. I had, of my own accord, put the knife into my rawest wound.

He stepped toward me. 'About your sister-in-law — what will she do?'

'She is absolutely safe, I think.' I liked him for

not saying Hortense's name. He had reticencies. 'Agatha Bourassa and Langlade's mother both have Hortense in special charge. She will be taken to Quebec. You have not answered about Amaiou. You'll not hinder him?'

'No.'

'Then I'm off. Good-bye, and courage to you, Godefroy. This is not the end.'

He came nearer. 'No, this is not the end. Your game is not played out, either, *mon ami*. There's payment for everything. You've made a good score. Good-bye. May God rest you.'

Yet I had gone but a little when he called me. 'I salute you,' he cried, and I made out his raised hand. 'You are most successfully a gentleman, Monsieur.'

I was grateful to him. Do the old, near the end of life, crave human liking, I wonder, as I found that I did now with death so near?

CHAPTER XXIX

FAREWELLS

It took me the next day to make terms with Amaiou. By sunset I had forgotten there was Indian in him, and knew only that I had an obstinate Scotchman on my hands. For the boy was determined to go with me. Duncan McMerrill must have been something of a logician. And with Scotch blethering united to Indian rhetoric, I had a sad day.

In the end I had his promise to remain and carry out my wishes. But it had been a battle of parts, and I won only because Amaiou's good sense — which both strains bequeathed him — saw the real necessity of getting news to Boston.

I had no talk with Langlade. I tried twice, but he was busy with men in the warehouse, and threw me a scant word over his shoulder. Then I was told he had gone to the Winnebago camp, and would stay the night, so I saw he was determined not to play any farce of good-bye. I had a mixed feeling that I should like to tell him not to mind; that I understood the trap he was in.

Before supper I went to the Langlade cabin. I dreaded adieus, but could not leave Agatha without a word. I had meant to ask her to walk with me, but there had been a shower in the afternoon, and the grass was wet, so I could only draw her out on the

little quay, and talk under cover of the lap of the river.

I held her yarn as she knitted. 'I'm leaving tomorrow on a trading jaunt,' I told her. 'Please say nothing to any one; I don't like good-byes, but I wanted a *bon voyage* from you.'

She kept her eyes on her work. 'You'll be gone long?'

'It's doubtful. Probably some weeks.'

'Does Charles know?'

'Certainly. Yes.'

She dropped her work and looked full at me; superb eyes she had; brown and full. 'Are you in a tangle, Monsieur? Do you need help?'

'A voyageur always needs prayers and a blessing. If you gave me yours I should feel them a possession. They would come from one of the finest women I have known.' I was looking at her as I spoke, and our glances met and rested.

'So,' she said. 'So,' and she looked at the water. 'Well, you shall have my prayers. Perhaps I, in my turn, owe you something, Monsieur. You've taught me things — about men as well as clothes. I'll not forget you.'

'Adieu then — have a gay summer. Think of me when you dance at the château — if you and Madame Rupert go to Quebec.'

'Wait!' She put out her hand. 'Answer first, please. Monsieur, shall I marry Le Corne?'

I was indignant. 'God help you, Agatha, I don't know what you women want in marriage! He will give you position. Can you — get along without the rest?'

She picked up her knitting again, and laughed as she flashed the needles. 'I wanted you to say that. I said you had taught me something. Look out, here comes Charlotte. You'll come back. I'll pray for you, Monsieur.'

I turned to speak to Madame Langlade, and catch up the baby. I was glad of the diversion. The good-byes in England had not pulled at me in quite this fashion; but to no one in England had I been indebted for my food.

I would not go to Hortense till evening. I had had no glimpse of her since we said good-bye two days before. I found her at the window in the starlight, her hands idle, her eyes on the forest.

'I am off early to-morrow,' I said, bowing before her.

She rose, and wished me a pleasant journey. She was entirely gentle, and absolutely inaccessible. We stood and mocked each other with smooth commonplace in a way that would have shamed two marionettes. I made efforts to ride over the bars and get at her, but she turned me aside with a blank dignity that left me stammering.

I could not think she would let me go that way. Even if she did not know as I did that this was our last hour together, she did know that no trip in an Indian country can be taken lightly. I stood like a suppliant, hurt, wondering, hoping. And words she gave in plenty, but they were phrases. It was not that I did not give her opportunity. I even asked what was the trouble, but she put me by, saying the day was warm. I knew she had been perplexed. But

surely that was temporary. And here I found a settled aloofness and detachment she seemed steadily determined to hold.

Her composure was so reasoned and definite that anger came to cure me of playing the beggar. She had thought out the relation between us, and was showing me where I, the Englishman, stood after all. I was too hot to see that this was an absurd suspicion; I saw only my hurt and her hardness. Before I knew what I was doing I had stormed out of the house with a short good-bye. With the door well shut behind me, I remembered I had said nothing of my departure to Suzanne. But I could not go back.

I rushed up the river-bank like a stung animal, trying to run from this new misery. I could not believe it had happened; that I had been with Hortense only ten minutes, and had parted from her coldly, that I would not see her again. I walked to and fro, trying for coolness; but I could not think. I watched the running water, and my thoughts slipped quite as uselessly. But I knew before I had paced many turns that I would not endure the stupidity and cruelty of this parting without one more effort. Life had taught me that most cruelties are unnecessary. I would go to Hortense again. But I retraced my path slowly, for there was anger in me, and yet more hurt pride.

Suzanne answered my knock. 'The mistress has gone,' she cried.

'Gone!'

'To the Langlades'. She went the moment you left.'

I started. 'But she never goes in the evening. It's late. Let me see her a moment, Susan.'

The old woman started back. 'She's gone, I tell you.' We both talked like folk in a daze. 'She never did such a thing before. She went away at once.'

And then I flung out a second time, and a second time forgot to bid the old Englishwoman good-bye. And now all anger was lost in a sudden desolation. There had been no moment of sadness or introspection on Hortense's side when she saw me leave. She had started for the Langlades' at once. I pulled my pride together, and made ready for the morrow's start.

CHAPTER XXX

WAITING

With the morrow we were off at dawn, two canoes of us; Mickinac and I, and two Menominees. To convince Mickinac of my integrity I took fairly liberal supplies. It had been an ironical business, getting them packed; selecting food that would be eaten by my murderer.

The Menominees watched us go, but Amaiou was the only mourner. He stood at the bank, his face blank and thick as clay. I had left him well instructed, and with a batch of documents that would have stocked a book of memoirs. Yet, except for the letters to my son and Mr. Claxton, I cared little what became of them all. Three months earlier the news the documents contained would have seemed of supreme importance. But my views had shifted. Saying good-bye to the Indian half-breed occupied me more than concern for his political cargo. I was not ashamed to show I was moved; Amaiou did better and concealed his feelings — so he looked like an Egyptian tomb relief.

My back was toward the settlement as we pushed up-stream, and I would not shift a shoulder to give a last look. I dared not. I was leaving too much behind in that huddle of cabins.

Indians are gossips at home, but silent abroad, so Mickinac left me to my thoughts. And I did not

drift; I thought continuously, greedily. Whatever death might open for me, I still had life, and life was so absorbing, and I was so little through with it! There were so many coils to think out. I could not remember to tell myself that it was useless.

But as I lay down that night, I had more than abstractions to occupy me. There was a definite decision to meet. For I saw, as we made our evening camp, that I bored the Menominees full as much as they did me. I lay down beside the bales, but they found a grassed hollow a rod or more away with trees between. It seemed I might escape. The Indians apparently believed in my goodwill, and would not watch me. Should I make a secret package of food and powder, and try to get away?

At first my heart cried yes, and my blood pounded. I might yet get to Boston. It would be a great adventure, and if death came it would not come meanly; I should not drop like a felled ox that had worn a marked ticket for his slaughter.

I stared unwinking at the stars, and fought the matter. After the first moment I knew I ought not to, but it took till dawn to conquer myself. Second thought showed that if I ran away the Menominees who were with me would probably carry my provisions and trinkets to the Fox nation. There Mickinac might reasonably be able to accomplish what I was pretending to do, and bring back a company of Fox warriors to massacre the settlement. No, I had grasped this plough; I must hang on. If Langlade had me killed, he must see to it that Mickinac did not get west to the Foxes. But that I could leave

to Langlade; he was far-sighted and capable. The birds were twittering before I had myself well beaten down and in hand. Then I turned over for a dreamless hour of sleep.

By the second day's travel I expected something to happen! When it did not, I waited for the third day — and that too went by. It would be folly to say I was not glad of the added time; I was a miser of every hour. I began to stretch a little, to chat more with the Indians. But with all my relief, I was harassed by an absurd situation. The Fox nation was only two or three days' travel away. It would not do for us to reach them; that would tie up matters beyond any untangling. It must be that we were outdistancing whomever Langlade had sent in pursuit; we must dawdle.

And so I set out for contrived idleness. I rose late, ate long, blocked our passage in every small way. It was irritating business, so that I sometimes forgot what I was idling for, and could have boxed Langlade for being dilatory. I grew very rested and fresh as the days passed. I had nothing for it but passivity; waiting. And my body responded till I felt like a tree with the sap rising.

Sometimes at night the wild thought would come that perhaps Langlade did not mean to make way with me after all; that the noose was not dangling. But always the thought shriveled. Langlade not only had no other alternative, but he had shown plainly what was in his mind; had almost warned me by his protest. I was as good as dead. In some way we had thrown off our pursuers; they would find us.

The luxury of the days was that it gave me time to go over my memories of Hortense. I could do that now; no danger of an after-taste. And early I had put away all bitterness about her good-bye. That was on her side only. Since I would never see her again, it need not concern me; my own feeling was all I need take into account. I could dwell on the piquancy and content of every moment with her — and as I did so, I knew that life had paid me for my trying of the wilderness.

The morning of the fifth day I woke before the Indians. Something roused me — perhaps my growing uneasiness that the Fox encampment was perilously near. I yawned into a dappled sky, and wondered why it would not rain; even a shower would give me excuse for loitering. I turned my head on the coat I always used as pillow, and something stiff tickled my ear.

I turned. There on my coat was a note — pinned with a thorn this time — a note the double of the one I found that morning so many weeks ago. I looked first toward the Indians; they were not stirring; then took the bark with fumbling fingers. My heart was leaping. It was as if I had said good-bye to life, and found it in my hands again. I was sure the writing would be Godefroy's. And it was.

'I have followed you,' it said. 'I am within call now. Indian runners are behind us; very near. When you need me, call — and I will come. I have knife and gun. — GODEFROY.'

One cannot estimate life or emotion; cannot say

that this is large or that small. But I know I can say that few things can mean to me what that moment did. For the second time I had been shadowed on this same Fox waterway, and by the same man. But this time he had spread himself over me as a shield. He had run all this risk and weariness for the poor chance of saving me. And now he stood ready to make the greatest sacrifice of all; to show his tortured face to other men.

The Indians stirred. I could not face them. I turned. We were at the edge of heavy timber. Somewhere there in the shadow was Godefroy with his torn body, his broken life, and his high capacity for sacrifice. I yearned toward him in a way that compensated me for some of the affection I had missed. And all I could do was to stare at the forest wall. I dared not even raise my hand.

But I made up my mind to make a stand; if the runners were near, I would wait them. I told the Menominees I was not well that morning, and we would not travel for the day. I took to my blanket to give the matter color, and having an inordinate appetite, asked the Indians to serve me something to eat as I lay in bed.

I met no opposition; indeed they were good-humoredly sorry, and brought me food at once. Mickinac — who had dropped his chieftain trimmings, and showed himself as having considerable wit to cap his youth — offered to catch me a fish and cook it. I showed so much pleasure at that, that he went to it quite like a white boy, and I concluded that he somewhat liked me.

It was a curious day as I lay on my blanket and waited; waited on Death. I did not feel alone. There was not a moment when I did not have the consciousness of Godefroy waiting in the shadow near. The silence was like talk between us. There was a special thing that these four nights on the trail I had wished I might tell Godefroy. I wrote it under cover of the blanket, and pinned it to my coat.

I wondered much as to how the attack on me would come. Would they wait till night, and knife me? Well, I would not try to watch or prevent; it would only stretch out the misery. Though I could not think of myself as at the end; I brimmed with energy.

After midday I dozed. I had seldom felt more peaceful, and the sun, the food, the warmth and softness of the blanket did their natural work. The Menominees were gambling near. I heard them dimly, heard the grumbled counting, the slap of the cherry-stones in the wooden bowl.

Silence roused me; a sudden absolute silence, voice, play, breath. I rubbed my eyes, and flung myself up. The Menominees were standing bunched together, muskets in hand. A canoe with three Indians was coming toward us down the stream.

My interest dropped. These men were not for me; my pursuers would not come in full daylight and wave their arms as they approached. The canoe drew near, beached, and an Indian sprang out. He called that he came in peace, and spoke in Menominee.

Mickinac grunted. 'It is Onedo,' he said, and raised an answering halloo. I stood an outsider.

But I was the target. The newcomers pushed by

their own people, and came straight for me, holding a note aloft. They put it in my hands with great importance. 'From the Sieur,' they said.

The note was written in a careful hand, and excited as I was, I was sure the script was not Langlade's, though the cramped signature might be his.

'Monsieur Le Claire,' it said, 'there is sickness in camp, and you are needed. Four Menominees came down with measles the day you left. There are ten more cases this second morning; Old King and Cochon among them. No whites have taken it yet, but the children have been playing in the Menominee camp, so we expect more cases. We need you at once, and in haste. The Indians I send with this will give you safe conduct. I remain, with distinguished compliments,

'Yours very truly,

'CHARLES DE LANGLADE.'

I read it slowly, then again and again, while the Indians gaped. It had been inspired by Hortense; she was the only one who knew I had any skill in medicine. I had told her, in boastful mood, that I had taken a year of study in the treatment of simple diseases to prepare for this trip. She had dictated the note — the style was not Langlade's — even the writing was probably hers. But it had been approved by Langlade; the Indian escort made that sure.

I pocketed the note, and called Mickinac and the Menominees. I bade them sit, for the matter was of importance. Then I explained what the note con-

tained, and that we must go back; I had little need to draw on the horrors of measles; they knew all of that, knew that tribes died like flies. So they agreed, after decent parley, that we should drop our plans for the present, and return to Old King. I dreaded their asking how Langlade had known where we were going. I was sure Mickinac thought of it; his wits were not slow, and I blessed him for letting the matter lie. But he was terrified — as indeed was I — at the thought of disease in the village.

That over, we were packing, and an hour later were nosing our way back downstream to make what return headway we could.

In all our talk and preparation I thought of Godefroy as if he were at my shoulder. I could not leave a note for him; the Indians would see. But Godefroy had said he would be within hearing. I drew Mickinac aside in my most ceremonial manner, and told him I wished to make an invocation to my medicine God for the sick people at La Baye.

Then I walked a few paces away, bowed to all points of the compass, and lifted my arms to the west. 'Safe, safe,' I chanted slowly and loudly. 'Am returning. Sickness in the village; am given safe conduct back.' I called in Latin, like a parish priest. French, the Indians might understand. Godefroy might not know English. But there was a reasonable certainty that he would have a little Cæsar left from his school-boy days. I intoned my chant many times, a dozen or more, so the words would linger. Then we embarked.

Even in the canoe I worked hotly, brain and hands.

I was mad to be back before the contagion spread to the white side of the river. It was not till I placed the men for the night, that I stopped to marvel that I was a live man again. Yet I repeat that I had not been able to consider myself dead. I doubt that a healthy man can.

CHAPTER XXXI

LA BAYE AGAIN

La Baye in two days. After we reached the river, the stream was with us, our canoes were light-freighted, and I allowed scant ration of sleep.

I kept Mickinac with me, and talked to him steadily. The youth seemed prepossessed toward me, and I made him partner in the fight ahead. For if we found the Indian village leaping to the tom-toms of the medicine men, it was doubtful whether I would be allowed in camp. Indeed I might be called the particular devil that brought the sickness.

I tried talking to Mickinac as if he were European, and it went fairly. I told him that the Indian custom of putting the sick man in the sweat-house and then plunging him into the cold water of the river was what made the disease dangerous. We had scant vocabulary between us, so I could not be sure I made my point; but at least he listened. And he did not look at me as the disease bringer, for he said a wandering family of Cherokees had come into camp a week or more before, and stayed several days. One of their papooses had died, all puffed up, and the color of dried blood. I went on with my school-master talk at that, and showed him how the sick child ought to have been put one side, away from other children. He seemed to take the idea; at least his

grunts ran in all scales of inflection. But I could not tell. The first thump of the medicine man's skin drum might scare him back to his old faith.

We reached La Baye long after dusk — indeed we would not have dared travel so late if the men had not known the river as their dooryard. The settlement was bleak as we slipped in — only the Jourdain house lighted. On the Menominee side were low fires. I had the Indians leave me at Langlade's landing and I went to his door, and tapped softly. The Pawnee slave came soon. I told him to wake Langlade quietly, and tell him I was waiting.

I sat on the string-piece of the jetty, listened to the frogs, watched the river, and marveled. Here I was back again, and by invitation. It had always seemed that the greatest curse of life was a safe stagnation; I was not suffering from it.

Langlade creaked out soon, coming on stockinged feet. He had pulled on shirt and trousers, and his hair was awry. 'I'm glad to see you back, Le Claire,' he whispered soberly, and shook my hand.

I shook his warmly. I had borne him no resentment; the situation had been forced on him. Now I was glad to give rein to my liking.

'How does it stand?' I whispered.

'Thirty cases in the Menominee village; four deaths to-day. Only one case this side the river; the Jourdains' little boy — though I think the baby is coming down.'

'Good!' I murmured my relief. I had worried about Hortense, for Caron went daily from her to the Menominees. I thought the Langlade household

safe, for Madame Langlade never permitted an Indian, except her slaves, inside her door.

'Any cases among the Winnebagoes?'

'Not as yet.'

'They are quarantined?'

'So far as I can handle it.'

We sat side by side, shoulders touching, whispers guarded. 'You sent for me,' I said. 'That was partly an excuse to save my neck. I know. But what more? You want me to take charge?'

Langlade faced me. 'You will? You know how. She says you do.'

I ignored the pronoun. 'I know a little, enough to help with this. Shall I go first to the Jourdains'?'

'Will you?' Langlade's tone was near to pleading. I saw that I had become his medicine man, and that, like many more civilized men, he was ready to treat his physician as a necromancer. 'Is it likely to spread?' he went on, and though it was too dark to see the strain in his face, I heard it in his voice.

'You are worrying about Catherine,' I broke in. 'She is all right; even if she sickens, there is practically no danger.'

He clapped my shoulder. 'You shall have everything you need.'

'I may need your help with the Menominees. They may not listen. Every one else here is well — Madame Rupert?'

'Very well. Madame Rupert has told me a great deal about you. But never mind that now. You will see her at once?'

I shook my head. 'Perhaps not for many days.

Greet her for me, please; also your household. I will stay with the Menominees. But I'll go to the Jourdains' now.'

He rose with me, and we creaked across the planks, and through the grass to the Jourdains' cabin.

'I will wait you,' Langlade said, and he stood outside like a door-post.

Madame Jourdain, fat-waisted, sagging-cheeked, but wide-eyed, drew me inside. Her husband was snoring in the lean-to. She had the wailing baby in her arms, and the sick four-year-old in a trundle bed against the wall. A pine-splinter light wavered uncertainly.

'You have come? He says you are a doctor?' she cried.

'Enough of a doctor to serve,' I smiled. I saw that she was not really worried; she was of the type of deep-bosomed, placid, indolent women who are very capable under their laziness. I could depend upon her.

I looked the children over — healthy youngsters, and speckled as spring trout. They were in no danger. I told the mother what to do with them, and was off again within ten minutes.

Langlade heard my report in silence, and I could feel him relax. 'Go back to bed,' I advised him.

'And you?' he asked.

'I will see Amaiou, then go to the Menominees.'

He demurred. 'You'll let me know what you're doing?'

'Surely,' I promised, and hastened away. It was curious for me to be leader. But I did not stop to think of that then.

Amaiou tried to greet me stoically, but made bad work of it — as did I. But I had waked him suddenly, so had him at a disadvantage. He knew I had been sent for — Hortense had told him — but did not expect me so soon. Even as he was talking he collected sticks to heat a bowl of meat broth.

I stopped to eat and wash, and make a packet of simple remedies. It was near dawn when I finished. Then Amaiou paddled me to the Menominee camp.

It was less than two weeks since that other dawn when I had been in the Menominee village, and had prayed for light to come, and safety with it. Now I found the death around me that I had fought that night to keep away. A row of dead bodies lay exposed on a rough, low scaffold. A group of mourners with charcoal blackened faces who crouched around them, had fallen in sleep. No one observed my coming till I roused the camp by kicking away a pack of dogs that were snuffing too near the dead.

I met scowls. As I suspected, it was convenient to connect me with this catastrophe; since the Indians needed an explanatory devil of some kind. Two medicine men came cursing out of their lodges, waving their wands at me, and shaking their painted rattles to scare me away. They were horribly painted in stripes and circles, and their horned headdresses wagging over their white circled eyes made them nearer demons than anything I had ever conjured. They cried that I must be stoned and put out of the way; that I brought the black death. I think the tribe would have obeyed them, and that I should have

been driven out then and there if it had not been for Mickinac.

For he suddenly appeared, and took the stage. He liked to be conspicuous. Now in addition to his love of doing something, he was really in earnest. He stood beside me, called his people to witness that he was their hereditary war chief, and told them to obey me. He assured them I was a medicine man sent by the white Manitou, and greater than any they had known. That my magic was white, and fire could not touch me. That I was neither French nor English, but a spirit from the clouds. His people stared and dropped away. They were sleepy, listless, and frightened. That gave me respite. The battle was not won — hardly opened — but I had time to look around.

I found sick everywhere; young and old. Their huddled bodies had fairly rubbed the contagion off on each other. It sickened. An Indian pest camp is nothing but squalor and savagery. I found Old King moaning in blankets in the back of his tepee. I set a gourd of water beside him, muttered some Latin for his benefit, and told him to drink freely. I repeated that I was a child of the Sun God, and that what I left him was the water of life. Then I drew his tepee flaps to keep out the sun, and told him to let no one inside.

But when I came to look for Cochon, I found only a stiff mummy on the scaffold; a fat, paunched body wrapped in a yellow striped blanket that I recognized he had stolen from me. A girl who had been mourning beside him waked as I came and renewed her wail-

ings. And she told me a curious thing; that Cochon had asked for me when he was in the fever; that he had kept crying to go west with me. I had not known that I meant anything to the fellow except perhaps for my rum. But I wished, as I looked at him, that I had given him the red shirt that he coveted. I saw to it later that he was coffined in a hollow elm tree and well covered and battened down so the wolves could not scratch him out. He was nothing to me, save that he had eaten my salt, but at the end he had shown me real liking. I could never be indifferent to that from any one — or other than grateful.

By sun-up I had the situation in mind, but not in hand. I saw I must start a rival medicine tepee. I put it to Mickinac. He shared a bark lodge with two young braves, and he promptly kicked them out and installed me there with my bag of medicine. Then we sat down and smoked the matter over.

I thought I understood Mickinac. He was a natural outlaw, and I had met such in all colors of men. The new appealed because it was against routine. So it took little effort for him to snap his fingers at the horned heads of the sorcerers. But over our pipes I tried to make him see it was one thing to take a new stand; another to prove one's right to it. I threw aside imagery, since he seemed to be fascinated by the white man's scant speech, and told him that to hold our tepee we must accomplish cures. That I needed his help. And I gave him some simple rules to enforce.

He was to keep the sick isolated, warm, dark, and give them plenty of water. I, with my incantations,

would do the rest. I was determined that he should have much ceremonial. He had liked my invocation in the forest. I had more of the same. And I would come out from the tepee at intervals and overlook what he had done. Also he must keep his patients out of the sweat-house.

And then I gave force to my instructions by sending him away while I sat in the hot semi-darkness and wailed Latin declensions through my nose and at the top of my lungs for full an hour. I had to fix my mind on having my grammar straight to keep myself awake. I did go to sleep at last.

When I came out of my shelter, the afternoon was well on. There had been three more deaths, and the wailing was like a pack of wolves in cry. The sorcerers were leaping and screaming around the sweat-house where they had a victim. They were covered with dried skins of the great timber wolves — the whole skin, they wore, the wolves' heads drawn over their own, the gray tails switching between their legs. As they yelped and jumped, I felt my Latin nouns had a hard fight before them.

But Mickinac had entered his wedge. He had two patients; two old women with no families to coerce them. They were flattered by the young chief's attentions and probably thought dying a small price to pay. I said some patters over them, gave them a draught of camomile, and went to see Old King. He had been asleep; his lodge-flaps undisturbed. That he was old and testy had kept him from being molested. He had emptied his water gourd, and I refilled it, and told him I would bring him broth at sun-down.

I went back to my lodge, washed face and hands in a disinfectant I had brought, and paddled back to Amaiou. I had him come outdoors and kept at his windward side. Then we laid plans. I told him to be my food kitchen; keep kettles of broth and maize porridge ready, so he could bring them to the river at my whistle, and leave them there. The night before he had begged hard to come with me, and I had left him flat and sullen at my refusal. Now he was brisk as a young wind. He had a dozen plans for getting meat and fish for his broth.

I sent him for Langlade, who came at once. I felt reeking with infection, so stationed the Sieur on the river-bank, and sat below him, explaining my plans. He told me the Jourdain children were doing well, and there were no new cases. He saw no necessity of my staying with the Indians.

'Let them die, if they must,' he argued. 'Are you a priest, Le Claire?'

It was hard to explain to him something not quite clear to myself.

'Disease is disease,' I stumbled. 'It must be fought for itself. That is if one knows a little, one must use it. Then, too, if I can cure them I'll really have influence. I can surely keep them from massacre.'

Langlade clicked his tongue. How much he was convinced did not matter. He agreed to keep me posted, to give me supplies from the warehouse should there be need, and to hold the Winnebagoes in quarantine.

We parted, and I went back across the stream with my broth kettle.

But I was to paddle the river once more that night, and that after dark. I was hot to see Godefroy, and felt he must be near.

I dropped downstream to the mouth of the Manitou, left my canoe, and started on foot. I whistled softly, and it was not long before I heard an answering call guarded as a hoot owl. I waited, and Godefroy came up in the dusk.

I cried to him to keep away, that I had been in camp with measles. Then I told him some of the things I had thought on the homeward trail. I had a thousand words to say, and I stammered a few hundred of them. But at least I must have made him see a little of what I felt; of what it had meant to me that he should have thrown his guard across my bed every night. But all he said in reply was one short sentence: 'For my friend, Sargent. Requital.'

We dropped that. Langlade's recall of me, the situation in the measles camp, I diagramed briefly. And here I met a surprise. I found Godefroy's mind running away from me and from the larger aspects of the story, to ask minute questions. 'Were the Jourdain children really all right, was the disease likely to spread to the other children? Had I seen Nicholas?'

Now, this met me as unexpectedly as if I had forgotten the paternity of the child. I had thought him indifferent to Nicholas — since he never responded when I pulled that string. But fatherhood has traps and surprises. This night he was not deeply interested in Hortense, nor did he care at all, apparently, for the fate of the camp. He wanted to be sure that

if the measles spread, his boy would have good care.

Then he himself brought up the matter of Ahnawa. He had come to think that perhaps he had better see her. I might be right. He could at least tell her what to do for Nicholas. He would think it over.

We parted rather hastily. He was full of his new worry, and I found him too absorbed to listen to some of the things I had wanted to say.

But I regretted, as soon as I had lost him in the darkness, that I had not made him listen to more.

CHAPTER XXXII

PESTILENCE

That night I slept — or lay awake — in my medicine lodge; Mickinac rolled beside me. The night was still, and I heard wolves in the timber; the dead bodies had brought them. Toward morning it rained, and the patter on my roof was like death drums.

Morning brought as sick and forlorn a sight as I had known — and I had seen pestilence in India. A dozen new cases and two deaths. The camp echoed; wailing cries of children, rattling drums of the sorcerers, and the death chant of the squaws. Over all was an east wind and a driving rain.

And here the broth did service. Amaiou, streaming with rain, covered kettle after kettle with tarpaulins, and brought them to the river landing. After I had ladled spoonfuls of hot breakfast into the camp I was too tired to care whether I was in favor or nor, or to bother with policy or incantations.

From then on I lost track of sensations. Life was a turmoil of food kettles, sick men, dogs, incantations and death. Disease raged. Why Mickinac did not sicken is a mystery, unless hard work is an antidote. For a savage who had never known routine labor, and who considered the work I asked of him a squaw's task, he worked well. I had to go on with a certain amount of chanting and folderol, to keep him im-

pressed. He believed in me, and I depended on him. That dependence heartened us both.

Days passed; nights passed; feeling merged into squalor, and endurance, without thought of time. When I was not sorting food or lading physic, or building bark shelters, I was burying the dead. The Menominees buried their dead in hollow logs, or left them to the air on scaffolds. This, in midsummer heat, would bring real pestilence, and I had constant war to get the dead away, and well underground. The bodies had to be watched to keep the wolves and dogs from them. I do not think I had two hours' connected sleep. I would drop down where I could, seizing the minutes.

And there was unending struggle with the medicine men. We fought over our patients like growling dogs at a bone. I would think a case well out of danger, only to find the sorcerers had won him to the medicine dance. The sweat-house and the cold plunge would come next, and by sunrise he was ready for burial. I had sometimes a despairing irritation with them that they died so easily. Yet I suppose the wonder was so many survived.

If Indians had logic they would not be savages; so Mickinac and I made slow progress. But the two old Indian women gave us a little following, and our food ration helped it grow. We lost cases, but it was where they disobeyed orders. Where we were allowed our way the cures were rapid, so that at last the Indian mothers began to listen. We told them to bring us their sick babies, that we would keep them warm, undisturbed, and in sound of necromancies,

and that we could return them sound and well. The venturesome spirits tried and found we told the truth, so more came.

'Warmth, quiet, shade, plenty of water.' I say the words sometimes in nightmare, as I said them hundreds on hundreds of times to the Indian mothers, and the reek of their oily bodies comes back to me, and I smell the dead fish around Old King's tepee. Old King soon came out of his fever, and spent the days dozing in content. However, I took little credit to myself for Old King. Amaiou's broth did that magic.

Amaiou brought news with the broth kettles. Most of the children in the French settlement were sick; Nicholas among them. Only one adult had come down, a young clerk who was very uncomfortable and profane, but in no danger other than from his temper. All the cases were going normally. Madame Jourdain had instructed the women as I told her, and there was as little need of worry as there would be in an English home group with its yearly crop of fevers and rash. The shambles I lived in seemed incredible in the clean air across the way.

There was often more than news in Amaiou's budget; packets of food from the Langlade women, sweetmeats of maple sugar, omelets of birds' eggs. I ate them balanced in my canoe, or smuggled them to Mickinac. I saved the sweetmeats for him. I loved to see him gobble, for he had a satisfied chuckle like a school-boy.

Packets came from Hortense — English food she tried to prepare — but never a word with them. I

saw no sign of her as I looked across the way. She was not with Agatha or Madame Langlade when they came down to wave a distant greeting. Yet I never forgot night or day that she had importuned Langlade till he sent for me on the trail.

Sunrise and evening — it was all one. They told me three weeks passed. For myself, I had no idea. The fight was so straining and intense that time lost value. I wrapped dead babies, washed live ones, helped old men get through the business of dying, and did not notice day or night.

Mickinac made the first jolt in my thought. 'No new sick for three suns,' he commented.

I stared. 'Yes, that is true.' I shook my shoulders to change my yoke. 'Then it's up-grade from now.'

Turned to the better, we went quickly. There was time to lift the face now and then to the sky. I found myself almost popular, and had followers who would help. We got the camp cleaner. The conjurers were surly.

There came a day when there remained only a dozen in bed, all doing well. 'Why not go?' asked Mickinac, and he looked across the river. I think, too, that he looked a little at the clouds. He thought me supernatural. I gave a weary grin as I realized how appropriate he would have thought Elijah's chariot just then.

'No,' I put the temptation by. I could not go yet. Every one must be on their feet first; every sick bed empty. Else, late as it was, the medicine men might get their turn. I would see the matter through.

Those last days linger sharply in contrast to the

maze before. Full summer was on us — warmly, friendly — the trees heavy in full leaf. The camp, cleaned, chastened, was almost livable. We had lost over seventy in all, and the place was quiet with sorrow. Groups of mourners humped together in the sunlight, and I sat with them and let them moan of their dead. I could not keep my own thoughts from death. I had met it much before, but not to stand breast to breast with it this way. I reshaped my values. Some things dropped, as futile; others rose.

I used to look across the reeds to the French settlement, and count the figures preciously as I saw them come and go. All well there now. I hugged that to me. All serene and well. And I had so nearly brought death and torture.

Old King had none to mourn, and liked his own renewed life. He puffed his feathered calumet in the sun, getting me to sit beside him.

And I prated as of old, and with all the force in me. For I had urgent need to dig out the seeds I had planted, and try a new crop. So I talked of brotherhood — Indian, French, English; all children of Life and Death; all bound by Destiny. Some colored brown, some colored white, but all caught in the net of the moving suns and stars, with the same Great Spirit behind. The Indian is mystic as well as savage. Old King listened. Sometimes he would nod.

'Then the English are no better than the French?' he asked one day, his pipe balanced.

'They are very little different — as you are, after all, very little different from me.'

'Then you will not get the Fox warriors to wipe out the Frenchmen?'

'May the Great Spirit blind me first,' I told him solemnly. 'Langlade fed us when we were sick. Every day he brought supplies. We must never forget that. We must tell it to our children. We must care for him and his people as our own.'

He grunted. An Indian understands this; the food obligation is binding. He looked at me craftily. He was afraid of my supernatural power; I had given him a full share of the chanting.

'You did not talk like this before,' he ventured. 'Why did the Great Spirit change your face?'

I tried earnestly to show him. 'Man grows,' I explained. 'Grows like a tree to the light.' I told him I had had a vision. Perhaps I had.

I waited twenty-four hours after my last patient's blanket was hanging out to air. Then I made a packet of my belongings, and gave Mickinac my sword for his own. I dodged good-byes, ferried across stream, and hallooed to Amaiou to bring me new clothes — everything fresh from boots to head.

With the sunset on me, I took what he brought, paddled up-stream, undressed, and washed as I never washed before. I was clean as a scrubbed pebble when I finished. Then I put on the fresh clothes, burned the old ones, paddled back to the cabin, embraced Amaiou quite as if we had both been Frenchmen, and tumbled on to my pallet to sleep like a trundle-bed baby.

CHAPTER XXXIII

DOORS SWING

The next day was a convalescent's. I was languid as a frayed string, and lolled in my blankets as if I had caught the Indian manners. I dressed, but did not have energy to cross my door-stone, and though I had lively interest in my food I let Amaiou bring it to me.

But the settlement came to me. All morning they came. I was so tired I seemed indifferent, but it warmed me. Coutrol stayed for hours, till he was carried away by the Langlade women. Then Jourdain took his place. He was a melancholy man who thought that I had saved his son, so emptied the history of his life into my listless ears. Yet I was happy in it all. And he was not alone in his confidences. Men, women, children, sat on floor, doorsill, and window, and poured out the gossip of the place. Agatha was going to Mackinaw very soon. She showed me a cap she was embroidering with quills, because I had told her she looked well in Indian finery. Clermont had made his wife a new cupboard. Ahnawa, the Indian, had been away for two nights. Madame Langlade did not know what to make of it. Sometimes Ahnawa was sulky, and would hide — but never for long. And Nicholas had cried for his mother till Madame Rupert had taken him home with her.

I changed the talk at Madame Rupert's name.

Hortense had not come near. Was she waiting for me to go to her? I could not yet. I was worn and tired, had no guard on my tongue. But why should she keep from me? I had not seen her since that night, over a month ago, when she had sent me away in disdain. Well, I would go to her soon. Perhaps the next morning.

And so the day went, and the crowd thinned. Langlade sent word he was busy with some traders, and could not come till late. I hoped my room would be cleared before he came.

It was. I was alone, and had dozed. I woke to find the setting sun full in my eyes, and Langlade standing over me, his hands out.

I jumped to my feet, and he clapped me to him. 'Beelzebub or Le Claire, I don't care what your name is!' he spluttered, 'or whether you or the devil forged your papers.'

I laughed with clearer head, and we took chairs. I told him of the clean bill of health in the camp, and that the Indians were bound to good behavior.

He chewed his mustache, and looked at me. 'You're thin as a starved doe,' he said irritably. 'It's taken ten years out of you.'

I thought of what I had eaten that day, and could afford to laugh. 'I'll get it back.'

The light sank. Amaiou started to come in, but Langlade waved him away. 'Le Claire,' he began. 'By the way, you want me to call you Le Claire?'

'It's as good a name as any. Though, as you evidently know, not my own.'

'Yes. Madame Rupert told me. She came to me,

Le Claire. The night before you left to go to the Foxes. She begged me not to let you go.'

'So I have surmised lately,' I mused. 'But at the time I thought she did not understand.'

'Understand what?'

'That you would — well, how could you let me come back alive!'

'You understood that?'

'Do I seem so great a fool, Sieur?'

'And yet you went!' He gave an unexpected sigh. 'It is as she said. You have different values. We cannot understand.'

I felt uncomfortable. 'My sister-in-law knows very little of me, Sieur.'

'She seems to know much.' He played with his pipe, turning it over and over. 'She is a great woman, and just. She told me all about you.'

'What about me?'

'She said you were an Englishman who married her half-sister. That you were of old family — *gentilhomme* — but not rich, and that her sister had money. Her sister, who was ambitious, thought that with money and family you could make your way at court. But you did not care for that. You took the money and made more — much more — but you would not do the things her sister wanted. You said that was not the way to spend life. And so your wife went one way and you the other, and at the time of her death you were estranged. And that you sent back to her family all the money your wife had brought you — and more. Is that all true?'

'Substantially,' I said, with my head in my hands.

'It is a queer story,' he pondered. 'I wondered if she told it as it was. Women see things differently.'

'Why should she have told it at all? Why should she have handed me over into your hands?' I said bitterly, my head still down. I was thin of soul that night as well as body.

'Chut!' Though my eyes were lowered, I could see his body shrug a denial. 'Listen. She begged for you till I thought cock-crow would come.'

'But why did she tell you I was English?'

'You are tired,' he reproved. 'Can't you see she poured out everything about you to prove what manner of man you were? She swore you would never bring harm here — that you had shared my food.'

I still kept my head in hands, but not from dreariness. Slowly it came to me what Hortense had done; it was superb daring to tell Langlade everything and risk the whole venture! But she knew her man.

'It is good of you to tell me this,' I reflected.

He twitched. 'I owed it to you. I had an idea you would care very much.'

'I do,' I said. Then, 'You believed her?'

'No, oh, no! I thought her a woman in love.'

'So you didn't promise to save me?'

'Promise? Oh, yes, I promised. What could I do? She would never have left me. And then she knelt to me. A man cannot have that. And she said if I would not promise, she would follow you the next day. Oh, yes, I promised. So I delayed. But I could

not have kept my promise. You could have done harm.'

'Yes,' I echoed, as one dazed. 'I could have done harm.'

'Well, do it!' he exploded. 'Le Claire, I came here to tell you to go your way. You've earned a free arm. My God, what you've pulled us through! Debts irk me. I pay them. Go on. It's the only way we can settle scores.'

'You mean?'

'Go on,' he thundered again. 'English as you are, go on, and do what harm you can. Go back to Boston, or wherever you like, and get your troops, if you want them. I'll give you convoy as far as my territory extends. Then we stand even, and begin afresh.'

I lifted my head and looked at him. 'No use, Langlade.'

'No use?'

'I've won this too late. My claws are cut. I can't bring troops here.'

'What do you mean?'

'I came here to see what was the chance of winning this country to the English. It seemed worth my life — many lives. It doesn't now.'

'Why not?'

'How can a man explain his soul?' I groped. 'So much of earth; so fair! Enough for all. And we soak it with blood to get it from the next man; the next man whom, if we lived with, we should look at as a brother — as I look at you, Langlade, and your people here.'

'Hang you!' he cried, 'I cannot make you out. When did you change to this?'

'How should I know. Perhaps before I reached La Baye. Alone in the woods for weeks, nations were flying leaves under the stars. I had never been so long alone, before. And the forests were so vast. I felt the helplessness of man, his need of other men; his interdependence. Then I came here, and you took me in your home. I saw you all happy, good to the Indians; serene — until I meddled. And since —'

'And since?' Langlade repeated thickly.

'Well, I have sat with death enough to last one lifetime. I have known of hunters who found they could no longer kill. I am there.'

He rose in the dusk, and sighed again. 'You mean to tell me you do not care what becomes of England?'

'I care very much. But it has come to seem that it is not the best way of caring for England, to send more of her men to be killed. I want her to win this war, yes. But not to seize more territory. She has enough.'

He walked the room — there was scant space. Four paces right, four paces left. 'I wonder if this is permanent,' he said. 'Back with your own people, would you change again?'

I shook my head. 'I think not. I am coming to middle life where one changes slowly. But I give no promise.'

'I want none,' he ejaculated. He walked again. 'I cannot follow. Yet, you must mean what you say. Oh, country is not so much. If the English win to-

morrow, I could wear their coat. But war! War is the finest game in the world, Le Claire.'

I laughed and rose. 'You may not always find it so. Your hand may palsy, as mine has done. One cannot tell. But you see the liberty you gave me does not mean much after all.'

'What will you do?' he asked me.

We stood together in the open door; the moon was rising. 'I cannot tell. Give me a little time.'

He put his hand on my shoulder. 'You will see Madame Rupert first?'

'Madame Rupert's plans may not be mine.'

'What!' he said. 'With Godefroy dead, it does not matter, does it, whether her marriage to him was legal or not? She is all right now.'

'She was always all right,' I said clearly. 'That never mattered. So long as she thought she was married to him, why married she was, so far as I am concerned. And married she is, so long as he is alive.'

'But he is dead.'

'Of course,' I said. 'I am too dull to know what I am saying.'

Langlade picked up his hat. 'I'll go. Success, Le Claire.'

I held him. 'I'm glad she trusted you.'

'Pouf!' he said. 'She knows me a little. We have worked together. But it is you who will work with her now. That is a great reward, Le Claire.'

CHAPTER XXXIV

ON THE MANITOU

LANGLADE'S footsteps died, and I sat and stared into the rising moon, helpless as a trapped thing. Down the river Hortense's light shone. I stood in hand's grasp of the dearest possession life could give, and the man who had done more for me than a brother came between.

I told Amaiou I would be alone. Then I walked the river-bank. The moon went higher. I must see Godefroy, who would be waiting for news. Heavy-hearted as I was, I felt no revulsion against him. We were all victims. And I must take my medicine as he had his. Yet, if he went away with Ahnawa, perhaps I would feel in time that my own hands were free.

I walked slowly toward the Manitou, tasting the beauty of the night and marveling over what Langlade had told me. I could have smiled — if there had been smiles in me — at Hortense's exaggeration of me. But I could not think of Hortense without a spasm of the heart that showed my knowledge of pain had just begun.

The moon shifted through pine and poplar. I had danced with Hortense in the full moon. It had been witchery to feel her step and mind in one with mine. And that witchery might have companioned me through life. I pulled my thoughts back; I must

take care, and let none of this slip out to Godefroy. His path was hard enough.

In this mood I reached his hiding-place upon the Manitou. At other times I had whistled as warning. But now, stumbling along with my dreams and my cares I had forgotten. I parted the bushes on the bank above Godefroy's little cave before it came to me where I was.

The moon poured brimming into the cup of the stream below me. There, the light full on him, lay Godefroy. He was laid out straight, arms to the sides, his scarred face to the sky. Even in that first instant, I wanted to get to him and cover him. He would have hated the exposing light.

I moaned under my breath as I got down the bank; I heard myself do it. I knelt beside him, and threw my handkerchief over his head. He had been dead some days, I thought. His clothes had been pulled straight, but by the dried blood that his coat did not cover, I saw the wound had been near his heart. I did not stop to wonder how it had happened, but laid it instinctively to the Indians, and thought they had arranged the body decently because they were on the Devil's river, and feared the black art. But it was not of moment to me how it had been done. I was occupied with trying to realize the fact; Godefroy was dead.

He was dead, and he had done much wrong, but what he had done for me I had never known man to do. And now he had gone beyond my voice. My sharpest hurt was that I had not told him that Hortense respected his memory. At first I had not

dared. Then, as I saw his temper further, and knew that I could trust him, I had not made opportunity. Why had I not?

I turned the knife on myself. He had offered his life for mine, and I had let him die without the word that might have made both life and dying easier. I suffered when it came to me fully what I had done. And I have never put it away. The memory aches still; it wakes me sometimes.

Dazed and deadened with this, it was some time before another thought entered. But at last, as I brooded over the body, it reached me that Godefroy was laid out as for Christian burial. I saw a cross of twigs at his head.

I jumped to my feet. I had come down the bank straight to Godefroy without looking around. Now I saw a sitting figure in a blanket not a rod away. It must have been there all the time. It was Ahnawa.

'You did this.'

She stared fixed and sullen as a snake, but did not answer.

'You did this,' I repeated, and drew my dirk.

She did not flinch, but she answered. 'Why not? Did he think I would take a piece of him that way?'

With all my prating about not taking life, I could have killed her gladly. And it seemed a right thing to do; one kills vermin. I put my dirk away.

'When did you do it?'

'I don't know. Two sunsets, maybe.'

'With what?'

She did not move. 'A knife.'

She was small, and could never have done that if

he had seen her. 'So you killed him while he slept?'

She lifted her lip. 'Why not? He told me to go and bring Nicholas. I brought the knife.'

I clenched my hand. 'Why do you stay here?'

She winced for the first time, drawing her shoulders together. 'The wolves.'

I stepped back to Godefroy, and sat by him again. I right, Ahnawa left, we sat like memorial figures with the dead between. The moon was full; we swam in light, and I saw as in a dream, the burnish on the leaves, the straight lines of Ahnawa's blanketed body. I had to think what to do with her; the path was not straight.

'You know you could hang for this?' I said stupidly.

She said nothing. It meant nothing to her; hanging had never crossed her ken. So I went to work slowly, and showed her that the white custom was a life for a life. I expected her not to care. But she did. She did not want to die. She did not beg, but she began explanations.

I cut her short, and sat again in thought. I tried to walk carefully; to think what Godefroy would have wished. I had seen at the last meeting that his boy's future pressed hard on him. So I made my decision.

'I will hold my tongue,' I promised, 'if you will give me Nicholas. Give him, and let me take him away.'

At first she fought me. But I was patient with her then — almost kind. I let her moan herself and her arguments to a finish. In the end I doubt that she

cared greatly. I think she had loved Godefroy savagely — even this murder was part of it — but she had never seemed maternal. She was always casual with the child. I knew that type in white women.

When she did agree, it was with sudden alacrity, so I suspected that an idea knocked at her brain which had already visited mine. With Godefroy buried, there would be no witnesses. Then she could snap her fingers at me. So I told her Langlade must know the whole story; that I would pledge his secrecy, but he must know. She would have killed me at that if she dared. But I forced her to my terms.

And then I sent her for a spade and a clean blanket to bury the body then and there. I wanted to be alone with what was left of Godefroy. I waited to see that she had gone — and be sure I did not sit where she could come back of me by surprise — then I knelt by the body, and said such parts of the burial service as I could remember. I wished I knew some prayers of his religion. Not that I thought it mattered. I gave him with full heart all that I could of my own.

It was hours before Ahnawa returned, for she had difficulty getting the spade. But time went, and I did not reckon it. My heart cried to this man. I promised him I would look out for his boy; mapped the future I would give him. Where had the mind gone that had lived in this figure before me? Well, if Hortense had forgiven him, God had done the same.

I could not but face one thing. Ahnawa had killed

him, and I had advised him to see Ahnawa. Yet even in my most morbid moments — and I had my share of them that night — I did not call myself to blame in that. For he had thought it out for himself. He had made his try, and it had succeeded even better than he could have hoped — though differently. He had gained death and peace. I hated Ahnawa, but he had cause to bless her.

The moon dropped behind the trees. I thought of Hortense secure in her cabin, and prayed my gratitude that she need never know what was happening that night. Godefroy had left me a free road to her. I might not win it. But he would not grudge it to me.

Ahnawa crept back, gray as a snake, and noiseless. I dug the trench back of the hollow where Godefroy had spent so many days. It was near dawn when I finished, and we laid him there. An early thrush felt the thrill of the morning, and sang over him. I piled the earth high, and said what I could of the 'dust to dust.' Then I knelt and prayed on my own account, in my own words, though not aloud, for my throat choked me.

Well, I had to leave him. I stood up, and let the thrush sing again. Others began; a chorus deepened. Day was coming. It had already come for Godefroy. I felt as I stood there that it had come well.

And then I left him to Ahnawa. She had remained standing, her head in her blanket, making no sound.

I went straight to Langlade. He was just rising, the Pawnee slave said, and I waited him outside. He swore at sight of me, thoroughly frightened. I looked disordered and gray. We went to the ware-

house, to our old place by the table. This was our third interview in that long loft of a room. There he had told me of Hortense and Godefroy; there we had made our pact that I should go west. The smell of hides, strong even in the fresh morning, swept it back over me. What I had to tell now made this in some ways the most distasteful interview of all.

He heard my tale with incredulity — then with revolt — why had I not told him before, that Godefroy was living?

'You would have hated to see him. Such a piece of a man, Langlade!' Unconsciously I used Ahnawa's words. 'It was not right that any one should look at him.'

'But he made himself known to you!'

'Remember, I was, in a sense, family. I was related to Hortense.'

Langlade brooded at that, going over the tangled story. He approved of my taking Nicholas. And he approved of secrecy. Yet he mourned that he had not seen Godefroy. He had cared for the man.

The hard interview dragged through. Then Langlade's thought came back to me. 'So this is why you thought Madame Rupert's path might not be yours?'

I rose. 'Yes.'

He looked away from me. 'Scruples! Well, go to her. Not yet, though. You look like a wisp of dried grass. Come, I'll take you home.'

He led me to the landing, untied a canoe, and paddled me up-stream. It was still early, and we saw no one. He followed me into my cabin, told

Amaiou to get me breakfast, and pushed me on my bed.

'Stay there till you are presentable,' he ordered. 'I'll tell the gossips to keep away.' Then he stopped to smile. He looked down at me thoughtfully. 'You and Godefroy! French and English!' he muttered. 'Perhaps you're right in saying it's about the same thing, after all. And I could serve under the flag that bred you.'

CHAPTER XXXV

RECOMPENSE

I SLEPT immediately — business that must be got over. I would have gone to Hortense at once, but feared the issue. I needed all there was of me to bring to her, and must pay some part of my debt to my cheated body. Langlade was good as his word, and I was undisturbed.

Sleep did its work; I woke renewed. And I had buried something in sleep; put the past behind. So it was in all senses a new day when I went to find Hortense.

It was scant noon, and the Langlades called me to dinner as I passed. But I forged on. Susan was washing on a bench outside the house, and she greeted me in English, her face working between joy at seeing me, and disapproval that I had not come before. She said her mistress was inside.

I went with breath tightened. Hortense had heard voices, and came toward the door. We stood a moment, saying nothing.

And then I saw, what no one had told me, that she looked thin as myself, spent and ill. Her cheeks were sunken. The change a month had done was more than I could bear. I ran to her and laid my lips on her hand.

'Dear love, dear love,' I cried. 'Will you marry me?'

I had not meant to say that at once. I was frightened at my voice. She drew back and I released her fingers. 'Hortense, forgive,' I bungled. 'I didn't mean to say it that way. But you looked ill.'

Still no words. 'You have been very ill,' I cried again.

'You have been back weeks,' she whispered. 'And never came.'

'I was in the measles camp, Hortense.'

She shuddered. 'You should have let me help. You might have died there.'

'Tut!' I cried. 'I did not.' I took her hand to lead her to a chair; but the touch of her was too much for me. I drew her to me. 'My dear, my very dear, will you marry me, Hortense?'

'No,' she cried. 'No, no, no!'

My arms fell. 'Forgive me,' I said, and turned away. 'So you did mean it,' I added at the door.

'Mean what? Don't go. Don't.'

'The way you treated me — that last night.'

'That last night? I had work to do — to see Langlade.'

'You need not have been unkind!'

'Unkind? Why, we're quarreling. Yet when I was kind — the night on the river —'

I strode back. 'Too many words. Hortense Le Claire, I love you. And if you will marry me —'

'Don't,' she interrupted. 'You forget.'

I bent to her hand again. 'If I've said it too quickly and rudely — Oh, Hortense, can a man be cool with what he's starving to get?'

'But I say you're forgetting. That day on the

river — you showed me then where we stood. My marriage — that was not a marriage —'

'Hush! You were married in my eyes, Hortense. I always felt it so. Though it would not have mattered in the least if you'd not been.'

'But there is more. Your wife's sister — the law —'

I led her to a chair. 'Man's law, Hortense. I have no respect for it. It does not hold in France. I cannot live with you in England. That is an inconvenience — nothing more. There are other lands.' I sat at her feet. 'Don't answer me. Wait, wait.'

And so we sat a moment. A breeze blew in, ruffling the papers. The air was sweet; wild columbine. I laid my hand on hers. 'Hortense,' I said more slowly, 'I've been a blundering fool. You're not prepared. But perhaps in time — I'll have a chance. I care for you so terribly, my dear.'

She touched my hair. 'You're thin.'

I pressed her hand for answer. 'I'm well — just tired. Hortense, Langlade has given me liberty — that, and more. So I can stay here for a time. Perhaps — well, when I sit this way close to you, I feel some courage. If I could teach you to care, you might —'

And then she laughed. It came as a discord, so that I turned sharply. She was crying; trying to laugh through broken sobs.

'Blind man!' she wavered.

I jumped to catch her. I held her in my arms as if she were a child, and petted her to quiet. Too light, too frail! My heart contracted. But her color came under my kisses. And when she said she was

but worn with anxiety for me, I let my vanity believe it true.

So at last she was ready to talk; to question. 'Why have you stayed away from me, John?'

'Another time,' I parried. 'No talk just now.'

'But there's so much to say.'

'And so much time,' I taunted. 'All the years ahead! Married folk seem to have so little to talk about. Let's not begin by being prodigal, Hortense.'

But her eyes were not ready for laughter. 'There's something you're hiding. Why, John?'

I drew her closer. I put our future to the test. 'Hortense, it's a story I can't tell. It's not mine. It's kept me from you these days. It silenced me the night on the river. But it's not mine to tell. Can you let it go by without questions?'

'You ask this seriously?'

'Very, Hortense.'

She looked at me fully and sweetly. 'Yes. The matter is buried.'

'You'll never question again — never through the years?'

'John, I'm no ghoul! But the matter — is ended?'

'Absolutely.'

She put her hand in mine. 'Don't frown. I'll never ask.'

But she did ask of what I meant to do, of my plans — of England. I talked long to make her see my altered standard. She feared I was doing it for her. 'And I'll not take you at that price,' she told me, and would have drawn away.

'You cannot understand it, or believe?' I cried at last. 'Is it so foreign to your heart?'

She leaned to kiss me. 'It speaks my heart, John, speaks it clearly. The feeling has grown. I thought it might be because I was of mixed blood — and cared so much for you.'

I kissed her in turn; but, for that one moment, more as a partner than a lover. A partner at last! I was dizzy with gratitude to life.

And then we fell to grave talk; of Nicholas, of Amaiou, of my boy. Later we went to stand before Langlade side by side.

He looked at us rather wearily, but very kindly. 'Strange folk,' he said; 'but you'll be happy.'

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE GOAL

Dawn of the first day of September, and we were leaving for Mackinaw. From the time I left London, Mackinaw had been my goal. Now I stood, my foot on Langlade's landing, ready to push north to it through the cool green water. My thought went back; back to that evening with Mr. Pitt when I told him of Mackinaw, of La Baye, and of my plans. How I had failed him! But I had not failed myself. The creed I had stated to Langlade held me firm. A lonely creed; not formulated and bolstered like the old one. But all I had.

There was a flotilla of us. Agatha was going to Mackinaw to visit, and Hortense and I joined her party, for at Mackinaw we could find a priest. Married, we would shape our plans. On to France, perhaps by way of Quebec — for Langlade would give us safe conduct — or back through La Baye and the Illinois country to the English frontier. From France I would go to England to fetch my boy, and that done, we would find some part of the earth that wanted us; where we could work out our lives. An oddly assorted family we were to be, for Nicholas and Amaiou were with us. It was an experiment taking Amaiou. But I felt somehow that I owed it to Duncan McMerrill to show his son the land of his fathers. If he were unhappy, if the Scotch strain

failed, I could always send him back to Virginia. He still called me brother; it would have marred some of my great happiness to have left him behind.

I laughed at Hortense. An English husband and step-son, a half-breed adopted brother, a half-breed foster child! Did ever bride start life better furnished with family!

'It is your dream of kindred,' she laughed back.

Oh, the laugh of her, and the touch of her, and the sound, sweet gayety of her! And the gallant courage of her that did not ask that life be easy, but that it should be fine.

Langlade had gone some days ahead of us — taking his Winnebagoes to Montreal. It had been hard for me to see them go to war — war against my people. Hortense stayed close to me that day, knowing I was having black hours. There would be many such days. Every new road means breaking old ties, old beliefs; and that means heartaches. But my determination could not change.

We sorted into the canoes, and the rowers took paddles. Susan, stern and glowing, had Nicholas in her arms. She had found a career in Nicholas, and the rest of us had to struggle for our rights with the boy. Ahnawa had spurned the child from the night she had given him over to me. Sullen and unmoved, she washed the clothes and swept the floors. Langlade and I, who watched, could make nothing of her. She was more than our match.

The moment for leaving came; the friends crowded. I dropped Catherine from my arms into her mother's, and stepped into the canoe. The last touch of my

hand was for old Madame Langlade. I hoped I would live to see her again. Coutrol, the Jourdains, the Villeneuves, my eyes were not quite clear as I looked at them. Down the river at the Indian village stood a straight figure, his arm upraised. It was Mickinac. I had spent the last day with the Menominees, and was carrying Old King's calumet and Mickinac's belt; pledges of friendship.

Northward! The paddles began their rime. We swept out in close rank to the mouth of the river. I leaned forward to Hortense, and pointed. There was a bright ray across the water. The sun had come.

THE END

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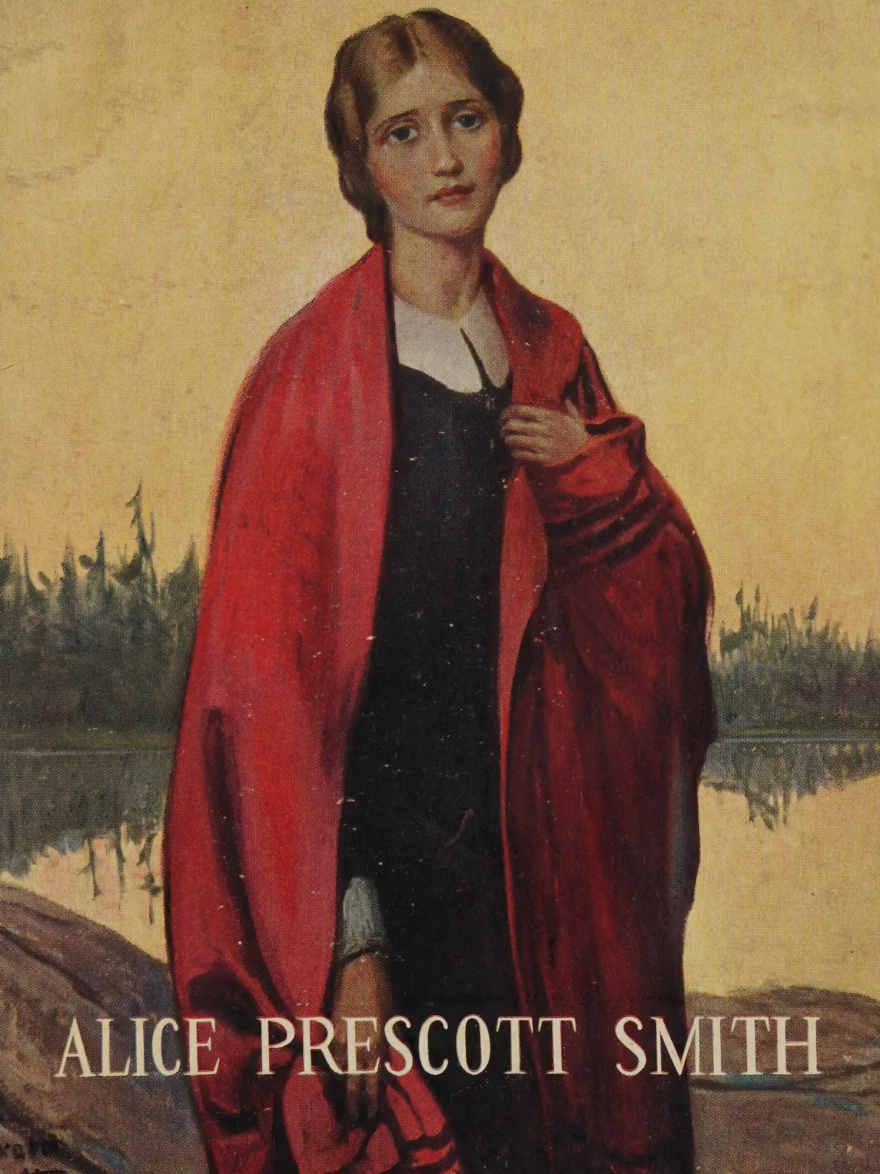

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